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MONSTERS THAT ONCE WERE MEN

by ERIC RODMAN

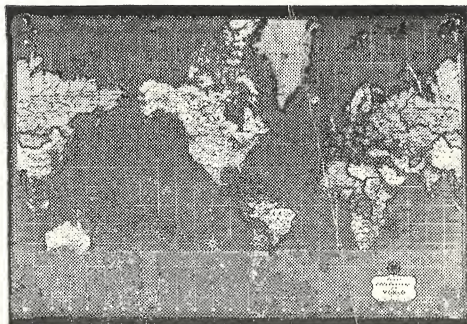
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ANGRY GIANTS**

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THE HORROR IN THE ATTIC

by ALEX MERRIMAN

illustrated by EMSH

It was a horrible moment for the unsuspecting young couple when that hideous THING came down the stairs, thump, thump, thump on its gruesome errand of death

THEY had been driving for two hours, and the rain was getting worse all the time. It poured down in practically solid sheets from the leaden skies, crashing against the windshield and washing spumes of mud down from the road shoulders across the rutted old road. It was almost impossible to see more than ten feet ahead.

The girl in the car felt snug and warm, despite the miserable weather. She snuggled up against the driver, telling herself over and over again that finally she and Ed were on

their way out of Tompkins Corners, that there would be no more interfering parents and snoopy neighbors to come between them. As soon as they reached the nearest good-sized city, Harmon, they could get married and legally do all the things they had up till now been able to do only furtively and in dark corners.

Married! Yet, perhaps tonight, perhaps in a couple of days, depending on the regulations, Lina thought. But the justices of the peace in Harmon would ask no embarrassing



questions about their ages. No one would have to know that Ed was only eighteen, she not quite sixteen. And so they would be married. Lina felt as though they were married already, and out for a drive in the country with the family car.

Ed said darkly, "Damn! That's the tenth time I almost ran off the road. I can't see a thing in this rain, you know, Lina?"

"It's really pouring down," she agreed.

"And this goddam new car, with all these yards of windshield in front, and I still can't look far enough ahead to see the road. We could get ourselves killed if this keeps up."

"It may rain all night."

"Don't I know it?"

"Can't we just pull up by the side of the road and spend the night in the car?" Lina suggested. It was a big, roomy car, property of Ed's uncle. Ed planned to give it back once they were legally married so no one could interfere.

Ed shook his head. "Uh-uh. Too risky. A state trooper comes along, finds us, wants to

see our marriage license or something, and we're cooked. He'll guess we're eloping and we'll be back in Tompkins Corners with a police escort in a hurry."

"A motel, then—"

"Just as bad," Ed said. "They may get suspicious and ask us to prove things. And then they phone Tompkins Corners and we go home."

"Well, if we can't park by the road, and we can't stop by a motel, and it's raining so hard you can't see to drive, what *are* we going to do, then?" Lina wanted to know.

Ed patted her with the hand that wasn't holding the steering wheel. "We'll stop at a farmhouse and ask to be put up for the night, that's what. Around here farm people are pretty courteous that way. And they won't ask for proof we're married, or any crap like that. We can spend the night there and drive on to Harmon in the morning when the storm's over."

LINA felt her pulse start to race at the idea. Yes, it would be wonderful, she

thought! Farm people would ask no questions. And it was only common courtesy to allow a couple of strangers to stay out a storm like this. Lina smiled to herself. They would tell the farmers they were Mr. and Mrs. Ed Donaldson—it was only a small lie, after all, because that would soon be their name—and they would be given a bed and they could sleep together all night long.

It would be wonderful to sleep in the same bed with Ed, after all these months of frantically making love in the back seat of his old jalopy or in the woods or in his basement.

And to think they would have a whole lifetime of love together—!

Ed said, "Keep your eyes peeled. Look on both sides of the road for something promising. I got to keep looking ahead to see where I'm going."

Lina peered through the grey sheets of rain for some sign of a place where they could stop. The car crawled along at fifteen miles an hour, Ed hugging the road with care. It was raining so hard now it was practically impossible to see the

white line that divided the east-bound lane from the west-bound, and he didn't want to wander into the wrong lane himself. And he had to be on guard in case someone else suddenly came into sight in *his* lane.

Lina looked. But the rain made vision almost impossible. Ten minutes passed silently as she squinted out over the rain-soaked fields, hoping that she was not missing anything worthwhile out there.

And then, finally, a place came into view.

Lina cried, "Oh, Ed, look there!"

"Where?"

"Over to the left."

He slowed the car even further and turned his head in the direction she was pointing. "I don't see anything," he said.

"It's a big old farmhouse, a hundred or a hundred fifty yards back from the road. I'm sure I saw it. It's kind of grayish-looking."

Ed stared into the rain. After a long moment he nodded and said, "You've got sharp eyes, honeylamb. I see it now. You're okay, kid."

"You like me?" Lina asked, pleased.

"Love you."

"Me too," she murmured.

Ed began to turn the car. It was a risky business; with the rain so fierce, it wasn't safe to make a left turn across the other lane, because there was no way of knowing if a car was approaching in that lane. But they had to chance it. Ed looked to try to see if the coast was clear, and then bore down hard on the steering wheel and swung the car across the road.

"Okay, we made it," he said. "Now let's find the road up to that farmhouse."

Ed drove slowly along the shoulder of the road until the gate appeared, a big wooden one fastened by a single throw-bolt. Ed popped out of the car, opened the gate and swung the door back, and got back in behind the wheel. In just a minute or two outside, he was soaked completely through.

The road up to the farmhouse was a pretty steep grade, and since it was unpaved and mostly mud by now Ed had a difficult time of it. But the car kept going, inch by treacherous

inch, and as they ascended the hill the farmhouse became more clearly visible, a gaunt gray building several stories high.

Not until they had practically reached the front porch of the farmhouse, though, and Ed was honking the horn to rouse any dwellers, did they notice one significant fact:

The farmhouse was deserted.

Many of the windows were broken. The front door hung open, half off its hinges. The entire place had the run-down unpainted look of a house that had long since been abandoned by its inhabitants.

Lina glanced at Ed. "It looks like a haunted house."

He laughed sharply. "You don't believe in crap like that, do you?"

"Of course not. But—do you want to stay in a place like this, Ed?"

"Where else can we go? I don't even think I could find my way back down that hill in this storm. And it's getting on toward evening."

Lina frowned uneasily. "But I wouldn't want to stay in a spooky place like this—"

"Why not? We'll have the whole place to ourselves. Nobody to snoop or bother us. If there's nothing to sleep on we can take the seats out of the car and make a bed out of them. Imagine, baby—you and me with the whole night together, and nobody to bother us!"

LINA had to admit to herself that that was a tempting idea. Complete privacy—yes, that would be wonderful. And this could be a sort of wedding night for them. Sure, they had made love before, but never had they spent an entire night side by side under the same roof. And here they could nestle up in each other's arms, listening to the patter of the rain outside—

"All right," she said. "Let's go inside and see what it's like."

They made a helter-skelter dash for the porch, getting there dripping wet even though they had parked quite nearby. The boards of the porch groaned under their weight, as if no one had trod here in decades.

Since the door was partly open, there was no sense in knocking. Ed stepped inside, Lina close behind him. The place had the musty smell of a tomb.

Ed cupped his hands to his mouth and called out, "Hello, there! Anybody home? Anybody home?"

He paused, waiting for some reply. None came, only the echoes of his own voice bouncing around. "Guess it's empty, all right," he said, shrugging. "Let's see what sort of place it is. Where'd I put my matches—"

He fished the matchbook from his pocket and struck a match. By the feeble, sputtering glare they looked around. They were in a big room, with a few ramshackle pieces of furniture covered by cobwebs. There was a staircase to the left, and a doorway at the right that led to the other rooms on the first floor. There was a big fireplace right in front of them, and the last inhabitants had left a substantial woodpile, shrouded now with the cobwebbed silk of years.

The match went out.

Ed said, "This place'll look a lot better once we get that fire going. I'm going to go out to the car to get some newspaper to start it up with."

"You want me to come with you?" Lina asked.

"No use both of us getting drenched," Ed said. "You wait here. The spooks won't get you while I'm out front, baby."

He darted out into the rain, leaving Lina alone. She stood near the door, glancing uneasily around the dark big room while the rain rattled overhead. She wished there were someplace else they could have stayed. Even with a fire going, the place was bound to be cold and drafty because of all those broken windows, and—

What was that?

Creaking upstairs? It sounded like that—like someone was moving around up there. Maybe someone lived in this place after all, Lina thought. No, that was impossible. No one would live in a ramshackle old heap like this. The creaking, she told herself, was simply the swaying of the old house in the storm.

ED entered, wet, his hair plastered to his face by the rain. Under his jacket he had brought newspapers from the car, and he rapidly shredded them and tossed them into the fireplace. Then, efficiently arranging the logs above them in such a way as to provide ventilation, he tossed in a match.

The dry wood caught fire almost immediately. Flames licked upward in the fireplace, as the wood crackled and burned.

"There. That should hold us for a while. And there's plenty of more wood to last us until we go to bed. If we run out, we can always break up this old furniture and toss it in," Ed said.

"What—what are we going to do now?"

Ed shrugged. "Let's explore the place. See if there's anyplace we can sleep."

"How can we find our way around in the dark?"

"With torches, silly. Just be careful not to burn anything."

Selecting two thinnish logs from the woodpile, Ed thrust them about a quarter of their length into the fireplace and

held them there until their ends began to glow mellowly.

He drew them out and handed one to Lina. "There. That'll give you light and keep you warm, too, as we go around the house."

"Okay," Lina said with a bravery she did not feel. She still heard creaking sounds from above. She tried to tell herself it was all just a girl's imagination, that she was tense and worked-up because she and Ed had eloped and stolen his uncle's car and had driven off in the rain, and that ghosts and ghouls came out of the story-books and didn't really infest every deserted house in the country. But still, the nagging fear remained.

Clutching her torch, she followed Ed as they wandered around the house. It was an old-fashioned farmhouse, with a lot of rooms. The house was probably nearly a hundred fifty years old—many of the farms in the neighborhood went back to the Revolutionary War—and it looked as though it hadn't been lived in for at least twenty or thirty years.

Most of the rooms on the

ground floor were empty, or else had a stick or two of decrepit furniture in them. In one room they found an old bed, a four-poster, covered with a thick layer of dust and cobwebs. Ed leaned on it experimentally and it buckled and crashed.

"Pretty brittle," he said.

"We'll get the seats out of the car and sleep on them," Lina said. "Right by the fire, where it'll be nice and warm. I wouldn't want to sleep on this old filthy broken-down bed anyway."

"Maybe there's a better bed upstairs," Ed suggested. "That's where the master bedrooms usually are. We could get the dust off pretty well, and—"

"No. Let's not go poking around this place any more, Ed. It gives me the creeps. What time is it?"

"Half past seven."

"It's dark enough to be later than that. Let's go get the car seats, and we can go to bed." She smiled coyly at him by the light of the flickering torches. "We can be warm and cozy all night—and if we get to bed

early, we can be up by dawn and on our way to Harmon. And tomorrow we'll get married."

Ed nodded. "That sounds good enough. But I want to take a look upstairs anyway. You never can tell what you find in these old houses. Every year or so there's a story in the paper about kids who find forgotten caches of gold coins or paper money—"

"No, Ed," Lina said uneasily. "Let's not go upstairs. Nobody left any money up there."

"But I want to see—"

She pressed up against him, slipping her arms around his shoulders, thrusting her breasts against his body. "We're all alone here, you and me—why waste time poking around in dusty rooms? This is the first real chance we've had to be together a whole night."

"Sure."

"So let's get set up for the night. We'll haul the seats out of the car, and the blanket from the trunk, and we'll get undressed and settle down on the floor near the fire, and—"

There was a particularly loud creak from upstairs. Lina

stopped in mid-sentence. She felt her skin growing cold, and Ed was looking at her queerly.

"What's the matter, honey?"

"Didn't you hear it? The creaking sound coming from upstairs?"

Chuckling, Ed said, "You hearing ghosts, doll?"

"Don't make fun of me. I'm—scared, Ed. I been hearing those sounds since we came in. Listen: it's like something moving around up there."

Ed cocked one ear toward the ceiling. After a moment he grinned. "Those are the walls creaking in the wind you been hearing."

"Well, I don't like them."

Comprehension dawned suddenly on Ed's face. "I get it. That's why you didn't want to go upstairs! You think there's something haunting around up there!"

"I never said—"

"Sure. You're afraid of the bogey man up there!" Ed laughed. "Well, come right on up there with me now and let's meet him face to face. I want you to see that there's nothing up there, 'cause otherwise you'll stay up half the night

worrying, and every time you toss and turn you'll wake me up."

"Ed, no. I don't want to go up there."

"Don't be silly!"

"Maybe I *am* still a little girl," she said. "But I want to stay down here."

Ed shrugged. "At least let *me* go upstairs, then. I'll have a look around and prove to you that everything's okay here."

"No, don't do it, Ed. You might—"

She stopped. She realized she was acting ridiculously. Her face reddened.

"There's nothing to be scared of, baby," Ed told her gently. "You wait by the fire. I'll go upstairs and take me a look-see."

LINA rested her torch by the edge of the fireplace and stood with her arms huddled round herself, while Ed mounted the stairs. They groaned and creaked under his weight as he climbed upward.

Lina wished he had not gone up. It was silly of her, but she was afraid. And she wanted him with her, his arms round

her, his strong body tight against hers, his big hands caressing her as he murmured words of love in her ear.

Mrs. Ed Donaldson. She liked the sound of that.

It was too bad her parents and Ed's had insisted on making them wait. "You aren't old enough," they said over and over. "Wait two years. Then you'll be eighteen and Ed will be twenty. If you still want to get married then, you can go ahead and do it. But we won't give you permission now."

Lina wondered if the police were out looking for them yet. Probably not; she had told her parents she would not be back until late, and it was only early evening now.

Maybe it would take a while for them to guess what had happened, when both she and Ed failed to show up at home, and with Ed's uncle's brand new car missing. Ed's own car, the jalopy, had been smashed up in an accident a couple of weeks back.

Lina shrugged. Even if they guessed about the elopement, there wasn't much anyone could do about finding them

until morning, when the storm had blown over. And by morning she and Ed would be in Harmon, looking for a justice of the peace—

Ed called from upstairs, "Nothing on this whole floor, baby. All the rooms are empty."

"I told you so. Come on down!"

"Not yet. I want to go up to the attic and have a look around up there. Maybe there's an old trunk full of money, or something!"

Despite her annoyance, Lina smiled. Ed and his dreams of finding a trunk of money! Well, there was no use calling him down. She chuckled at her foolishness in supposing there were all sorts of monsters up in the higher floors of the house. Maybe her parents were right, and she *was* too young to marry, if she still feared things like that.

But there were plenty of older people who would be nervous inside an old house like this, with a raging storm outside, and wind blowing through the broken windows.

While she waited for him to

return from the attic, Lina glanced around the room. There was a closet door she had not noticed before, in the far corner. Lina nodded to herself: perhaps there would be something interesting in the closet. It was worth investigating. It would be funny if she came across the treasure-trove Ed hoped to find, she thought. Right down here on the ground floor, while he poked around upstairs.

Lina picked up her torch, which still had not burned more than half its length, and crossed the room to the closet.

She opened it. The ancient hinges protested squeakily as the door was opened.

Lina stared in. She gasped in dumbstruck horror.

The closet was full of bones.

Human bones? It looked that way. They were heaped in chaotic disarray, legs and arms and ribs all jumbled into disorder, and here and there a skull grinning evilly up at her. The bones were yellowing, and clean of flesh except for occasional fragments of muscle or tissue that clung to them.

Lina stared at the grisly

bonepile for a long moment while her brain registered the fact of what she was seeing. Her reaction time was slow.

She began to scream hysterically.

"Ed! Ed, come down here! There are bones in the closet!"

Her scream died away.

And, suddenly, terrifyingly, she heard Ed's answering scream from the attic.

LINA was paralyzed a moment. The bones were terrifying enough—but Ed had screamed the way she had never heard him scream before: wordlessly, a howling outburst of sheer mind-wrenching terror.

What on Earth—? Lina thought. She was almost frantic with fright. On numb legs she hurried toward the stairs, holding her torch high, not daring to think of whatever ghastly discovery had wrung that scream from her lover upstairs.

Ed screamed again. Then she heard him rapidly running down the stairs, scrambling pell-mell out of the attic, screaming as he ran.

Rooted, Lina watched. She saw him come into view on the

second-floor landing. He looked back over his shoulder—then, clutching his chest suddenly, he toppled and fell the rest of the way, bumping down step over step, rolling like a sack of laundry toward the foot of the stairs, coming to rest in a dismal little heap only inches from where Lina stood.

She knelt over him.

"Good God, Ed, what happened? What did you see up there?"

He did not answer. His eyes were open, and they stared glassily forward; his mouth lolled open too, giving his face an idiot's grotesque expression. His skin was chalk-white and terrible to look at. It was bleached of blood—even the roots of his hair seemed pale.

Lina shook his shoulder. "Ed—Ed, are you okay? Wake up, Ed!"

She touched his cheek. It was cold.

The grim realization began to dawn on her slowly. It was impossible, it was beyond belief, it challenged all reality. But it was true.

She put her hand to his nos-

trils. There was no sign of breath.

She touched his eyeball gingerly. It did not flicker in response.

She put her ear to his chest. All was silent.

“Oh, no—Ed—!”

Dead? A strapping six-footer in perfect health, a robust eighteen-year-old dead, she wondered? Frightened to death? A heart attack brought on by whatever he had seen in the attic—

Thump.

Chilled, Lina looked up. What had that sound been?

Thump.

Again!

Her mind swayed, nearly gave way. Ed a lifeless corpse at her feet, picked human bones stacked casually in the closet, and—

Thump.

Louder, now. Closer.

Lina opened her mouth to scream, but no sound could pass her lips.

Thump.

She lowered Ed's body to the floor, stood up, lifted the torch, peered into the darkness above

the landing on the stairs.

Thump.

She saw it now. Something was descending the stairs, slowly, one step at a time.

Thump.

Something—monstrous.

TORCH in hand, Lina backed away from the staircase. The creature was in plain view now, no more than five or six steps from the foot of the stairs, advancing with ponderous stride.

It was unbelievably repulsive to look upon.

Lina's fear-widened eyes stared at it. It looked like a man, but it was immense, perhaps as much as seven feet tall. It was naked to the waist, wearing only ragged strips of cloth that might once have been trousers but which long since had rotted to fragments.

The creature's skin was brownish and so wrinkled it looked incredibly antique, almost a walking mummy. White hair and a white beard flowed wildly. Out of the swirl of hair two blazing eyes glared.

And—weirdest of all—the

creature was covered with *cobwebs*—as though he had slept for years, while the spiders patiently toiled.

The creature reached the foot of the stairs and carefully stepped over Ed's prostrate body. Lina backed away, gripping the torch tightly. She longed to run, to burst through the door and out, but she was afraid: in order to reach the front door, she would have to pass practically in front of the monster.

And what would she do outside, in the rain, in the darkness? The keys to the car were in Ed's pocket. And they would do her little good in any event, since she did not know how to drive.

"Keep away from me," she said in a thin, terrified voice. "Whoever—whatever you are—keep back! Don't touch me!"

"For long years I sleep," the being said. Its voice was deep and rumbling, and sounded like the swinging of a rusty gate. "And then—strangers come—disturb my sleep—and I feed!"

"No—no—" Lina gasped.

The monster chuckled rum-

blingly. With one swipe of its paw-like hand it swept the cobwebs from its face. Lina noticed that the creature's fingernails were tremendously long, practically curling about each other in their length.

"What—year is this? Tell me, little one."

"1959," Lina heard her own voice answer.

"Nineteen—fifty—nine," the monster mused. "So it is twelve years. Or is it thirteen? I sleep so long, each time. And when I wake, I am so hungry....so hungry, terribly hungry...."

"What *are* you?"

"What am I? My relatives wondered that, too, a hundred years ago. They left me here—dead, they thought, but I was only asleep—and I wake, when I am disturbed, and then I must eat—"

LINA stared at the nightmare creature in horror. No wonder Ed had had a heart attack. Probably the monster had appeared suddenly, without warning.

And what was it? Terribly old, huge in size, it evidently slumbered here for decades at

a time, awakening only when travellers trespassed on the deserted property. And then it fed. Lina shivered, thinking of the pile of bones in the closet.

The monster laughed. "Come to me, pretty one. And you *are* a pretty one. It will be your turn first, for you look tender and juicy—and afterwards, if my appetite remains, it will be the turn of your unfortunate companion here."

"No," Lina whispered. "You'll—eat us?"

"Of course."

The monster took a lumbering step forward toward her. It was immense, all right—seven feet tall, at least.

Lina brandished the glowing torch like a spear. She wondered whether she could succeed in ramming the torch into the creature's face and running past him, out into the night, into the dark—

It was her only hope. As the creature came toward her she tightened her grip on the torch and thrust it forward, between the outstretched hands, into the loathsome cobweb-covered face. But the monster batted the torch away almost immedi-

ately. There was the smell of burning flesh in the room, and Lina knew she had singed him. But not seriously.

And now the torch was gone.

She started to run. An enormous hand reached out, grabbing her in like a fish on a hook.

"No!" she screamed. "Let go of me! Help! Help, somebody!"

She shrieked until her voice gave out. There was no one who could hear her for miles around. And Ed, Ed whom she had loved, Ed who was to have been her husband, Ed lay dead on the floor.

Ed was lucky, she thought. He had died quickly. Her own death, she realized with numbing terror, would be slower and infinitely more painful.

She kicked and scratched, but it was useless. The creature held her tightly. With one massive paw it ripped away her clothing, tossing the tattered garments to the floor, exposing her firm white breasts, her soft woman's body. Close up, she could see the creature's teeth—hideous yellow fangs that looked like a wolf's teeth, not a human being's.

Why don't I go mad? she wondered.

The monster cradled her in its arms. It smelled foul, the smell of death.

"So tender," it crooned. "So juicy....my best feast in years...."

Lina screamed.

Ed was lucky, she thought again. She writhed and twisted. The enormous mouth was opening.

"My best feast in years...."

Lina screamed again. She screamed until she could scream no more, until the final moment when the yellow fangs met in the soft flesh of her throat, and she felt the hot spurt of her own blood against her breasts, and she began to discover just what it was like to be devoured alive....

THE END

SCIENCE SHORTS

by EDGAR P. STRAUS

A small rocket that enables a man to run as fast as a thoroughbred racehorse has been invented by a New Jersey scientist and is being considered for possible military use. The rocket is worn strapped to the back, and provides motive thrust that allows a man to run at superhuman speeds, jump rivers, and scale high walls.

The Army has developed a

"three-dimensional" type of radar which gives simultaneous readings of bearing, distance, and altitude. The device, which is portable, is known as "Frescanar," or frequency-scanning radar. Conventional radar requires huge webbed frames of metal that emit and receive radio beams, while the new antenna is much more mobile and scans electronically by a radically different method.

MONSTERS THAT ONCE WERE MEN

They were like creatures painted by a drunken artist,
ghastly, utterly repulsive caricatures of humanity!
Yet, twisted though they were, they were still human

by ERIC RODMAN

WE were en route from Arenack to Delimion XI when some trouble developed in the gyroscopic drive stabilizers, and so we decided to lay over for repairs at the nearest planet. We weren't in any real hurry to get to Delimion XI, because we were flush from our last hauling job, and didn't need cash in a hurry. That's our trade, you see—interstellar hauling. I've been a free-lance transport man for the last twenty-eight years, and I like the work just fine. I carry a crew of eight, charge top rates and get them too, and the work is pleasant if you have the right kind of disposition for it, which I happen to

have. But the events of that simple little stopover for stabilizer repairs nearly soured my disposition for good.

The nearest planet lying in our direct path did not have a name. It was listed on my charts as uninhabited and uncolonized, but Earthtype and suitable for emergency landings. That sounded fine with all of us. It would take us, I figured, about three days to make the necessary repairs in the stabilizer. A couple of the men were in favor of going straight on to Delimion XI and getting it fixed there, but I damped out that idea in a hurry: spacehopping with defective drive stabilizers is the sur-



est way of getting lost and winding up in one of the No-where Galaxies. So we headed for the nearby uninhabited planet.

We got there later that day. It was the fourth planet of a goodly-sized sun, a yellow one that had somehow acquired a dark-star companion. We went into a landing orbit around the planet.

When we were twelve thousand miles up and dropping planetward fast, Sid Hammermill, my first mate and the only man on the tub who calls me "Johnny" instead of "Captain," came into my quarters with a puzzled frown on his face and said, "Johnny, are you sure this planet is uninhabited and uncolonized?"

"That's what it says on my charts, Sid. Why?"

"We're picking up something funny on the mass-detector screen. It's hard to tell from this high up, of course, but the reading indicates a metal object pretty close to a mile long down there. Best guess I could make is that it's a spaceship sitting down there."

"Any sign of a colony?"

"Nope."

I scratched my chin reflectively. "Have you tried to make radio contact?"

Hammermill nodded. "Sparks has been twiddling his dials the last ten minutes. No answer, not even a CQ."

I began to smile. "Maybe it's a wrecked liner, then. And lots of salvage money for us, maybe. Order course corrections that will put us down next to that ship—if it is a ship."

HAMMERMILL vanished down the companionway to relay my orders to our astrogator, Mike Thorne, while I sat back and contemplated the pleasant thought of pulling in a salvage fee for a lost spaceliner. The ship itself, of course, would probably be pretty near worthless—it doesn't pay to haul scrap metal over interstellar distances—but there might be furnishings on board, valuable luggage, still-useful parts of the ship's drive equipment, and the like—enough to add up to a comfortable few hundred thousand

Galactic Units in fees. Not bad for a repair stopover, I thought. Not bad at all.

The course corrections were made and the ship dipped lower toward the planet. At the three-thousand-mile level, Hammermill phoned from the astrogration coop to report that he had taken a close-gauge reading on the mass-detector, and the mysterious object below was definitely a spaceship, and a big one—not a piddling three-hundred-foot job like ours, but one of the massive five-thousand-footers used on the luxury interstellar lines, and capable of holding quite a few hundred well-heeled tourists.

Planetward we spiralled, and when the automatics took over and lowered us the last few thousand feet through the planet's atmosphere we could see for ourselves: it was a wrecked superliner. The big ship had come down with an awful impact, flattening the thick jungle for a couple of miles all around it. We made our landing in the cleared area, not far from the ship itself.

After the routine atmosphere checks, I left the ship with two of the men to have a look at the wreck. It was lying in a sort of crater, shallow but broad, which indicated that it had come down bellywise and hard. The rear end of the ship, where the drive compartments normally would be, were just so much shattered and twisted junk. No salvage back there, I thought ruefully.

It looked as though there had been a major explosion that had practically ripped the ship apart. And the accident had happened a long time ago. Weeds and even small trees were sprouting in the fissures along the ship's weather-pitted skin. I could just barely make out the faded lettering along the tarnished hull: EMPRESS OF SATURN.

Wheels began to turn in my head. The EMPRESS OF SATURN had vanished on an Earth-Capella run back in—oh, maybe 2431 or so. At least thirty years back. I was a freshman spacer with a brand-new ticket when it happened. It was one of the all-time major space accidents, since there

were more than 800 people on board, and the ship had never been found.

I grinned gleefully. "Maybe there won't be any salvage dough in this for us, but there'll be plenty of publicity! This old heap is famous! Soon as we radio the news back to Arenack—"

They weren't listening to me. Danny Tsung grabbed me by the elbow and turned me halfway around.

"Chief—look over there—at those *things*—"

Things was the only way to describe them. There were perhaps nine or ten of them, standing just on the other side of the line that divided the clearing from the forest, and they looked like things out of a *nargheel-smoker's* worst nightmares.

They were roughly human in shape, and I mean *roughly*. There was no hair on them, nor any clothing. And their bodies were unutterably repulsive. I felt like vomiting at the sight of them.

They looked like living corpses, with their white domed skulls and the big star-

ing eyes. One of them had an extra set of limbs sprouting out of the sides of his chest—not arms, but boneless tentacles that flailed around nervously like pale whips. Another had disgusting slimy skin that oozed little blisters of pus.

A third had no shoulders; his head was joined to his chest by an inch or two of neck, and the effect was grotesque. Next to him was something whose body was covered with quills like a hedgehog, and another of the creatures might have been a woman, only she had a double row of breasts running all the way up the front of her body, animal-fashion.

Nightmare creatures. Monsters painted by a drunken artist. But these were real. They were standing perhaps a hundred yards away, looking at us with deep curiosity and a certain bold defiance.

Danny Tsung said thickly, "Of all the sickening sights I ever don't want to see again—"

"I thought the survey team report said this planet had no

native life," Marty Brecht murmured.

"This isn't native life," I said. "Unless I miss my guess, these are the descendants of the survivors of the EMPRESS OF SATURN."

"What?" Tsung and Brecht asked at once.

I nodded. "Mutants, all of them. Makes you sick to look at them, doesn't it? But they're the descendants of Earthmen. We're going to have a pretty story to take back when we leave here," I said grimly.

As I finished speaking the mutants turned with one accord and fled like shadows into the forest. A moment later, I heard a creaking sound behind me, coming from the wrecked ship.

I turned. A hatch was opening. And a man was climbing down to greet us. Not a mutant, but a *man*.

HE looked terribly old. His hair was white and fell in unkempt tangles to his shoulders; his beard, also white, fluttered in the wind. He wore faded rags and walked with a

stiff arthritic limp. He came toward us unsteadily, stopped a few yards away, and said in a voice that was obviously rusty from long disuse, "Are—you—from—Earth?"

"We're Earthmen, yes. I'm Captain Johnny Harmon of the freight-ship *Marie*. We stopped here for repairs and saw the wreckage from above."

The old man smiled painfully, showing time-rotted teeth. "You're—a little late—for rescue," he said, and every word was an effort. "I'm the only survivor left. And I'm—not going to last—too much longer—"

He coughed suddenly and came toppling forward. Tsung caught him before he hit the ground.

"The old man passed out. What should we do with him?"

"Take him to the *Marie*," I said. "He probably needs medical care. We'll let Kryholt have a look at him."

We carried the old man delicately aboard our ship. The crew came crowding round; they had seen the weird mutants and the old man, and they

wanted to know what was going on on this planet. I shut them up and got them assigned to jobs, putting three of them to work on fixing the drive stabilizer, which was, after all, the main reason why we were here.

Taking the old man into my quarters, we laid him out on the hammock and Tom Kryholt, who doubles as our medic and as ship's purser, had a look at him. Kryholt reported that the old fellow was in reasonably good shape, no organic diseases, but that the excitement of our landing had conked him out. An injection of lurchenosil brought him around quickly enough. And a strange story began to emerge, told in lame, halting gasps.

His name was David Matson and he said he had been born in 2401, which made him only fifty-nine; he looked at least eighty. He had just turned thirty, and newly married, when he took passage aboard the ill-fated liner EMPRESS OF SATURN.

The first two weeks of the luxury cruise had been splendid. But tragedy struck on the

fifteenth day; an explosion ripped the drive compartment apart. The ship was crippled but not seriously damaged, and the officers decided to limp down on this planet and send out an S.O.S., rather than risk further travel.

But there was a second explosion while landing, and a third. As Matson told it—his face contorted with the pain of memory, even after thirty years—the ship was raked with fire from end to end. It tumbled down through the atmosphere. Hundreds of passengers died—including, Matson told us quietly, his wife of two weeks.

They landed, somehow, and there was a final explosion at landing which virtually split the ship apart and showered the survivors with atomic radiation. There was a fierce scramble to get out of the ship, which was thought to be on the verge of yet another explosion.

No explosion came. The dazed and burned survivors gathered in the forest nearby. Only about three hundred of the ship's passenger list had survived.

The radio equipment was totally wrecked. Most of the officers and crew had perished. There was nothing to do but to settle down on this uninhabited planet and wait for rescuers, rescuers who were not to arrive for thirty years.

The survivors built crude shelters in the forest. As the days passed and their burns healed, they took stock of the situation and decided that they would have to consider themselves involuntary colonists. Couples who had survived the disaster together began to have children. Other couples were formed. Matson, out of grief for his dead bride, chose to live alone.

And then, nearly a year after the crash, the first children were born on the new world.

They were monsters. Loathsome monsters.

Many of them died at childbirth. But a good portion survived. There was not one normal birth. The hellish atomic fury that had sleeted through the exploding ship had played havoc with the genes of the passengers, and their children

were hideous deformed mutants.

A number of the survivors killed themselves. Others refused to have children again. But still, the monster-children continued to be born. Their numbers mounted. Fifty, sixty, a hundred of them, no two alike in superficial detail, every one a creature out of nightmare.

A turning-point came six years after the crash, Matson said, when it was discovered that there were more of the monster-children than there were of human survivors. And the proportions mounted. By the tenth year, only a hundred eighty of the survivors remained, and there were some five hundred mutants living in the little crude village.

And, when the first mutants were twelve and thirteen, they began to reproduce themselves. A war of extermination followed, the mutated children turning on their normal parents. More than a hundred died the first week. The rest fled back to the safety of the shattered ship, using it as a fort.

During the years that followed, Matson said, the normals gradually died off or were killed, while the monsters in the forest thrived and became more numerous.

"Eight years ago," the old man finished, "the only remaining survivor beside myself died. Since then I've been alone, living in the ship. The monsters don't seem to care about me.

"Several times they've come upon me while I was in the forest gathering food, and they've left me alone." Matson grinned feebly. "Maybe they're letting me live as a kind of walking souvenir," he said. "I don't know. But that's the story of the EMPRESS OF SATURN. A race of monsters sprang up. There are thousands of them in the forest now—they breed fantastically fast. They die young, of course, but there are always more to take the place of the dead ones."

OLD Matson was obviously exhausted by the telling of his story, so we let him be. I called the crew together in the galley and repeated the entire

tale, just as I had heard it from the old man.

Marty Brecht nodded. "And you can see the monsters looking at us, Captain. They're all around. Peeping out of the forest at us. Afraid to come near."

"The sooner we get off this planet," Danny Tsung said, "the happier I'm going to be. How long do you think we'll be here, Captain?"

I shrugged and glanced at Hammermill. "Sid? When do you figure the stabilizer will be in shape?"

"At least another two days of work, Johnny. And I wouldn't want to rush away without giving it a good flight test first. Make it three days altogether."

"Three days!" Tsung cried. "And those damned *things* making eyes at us from the woods!"

"They're probably more afraid of us than we are of them," I said crisply. "Carry sidearms at all times when you're outside the ship, and don't stray very far. I don't expect any trouble from those creatures."

As I spoke, I walked to the port and peered out. Tsung hadn't been joking: repulsive-looking heads were popping out behind every tree. I counted at least twenty mutants watching us.

But I didn't think we were due for trouble from them. I was dead wrong.

I sent the men about their jobs and started work on my daily log entries. About an hour before mess time, Tom Kryholt came to see me. He had bad news. Old Matson was dead.

"His heart just couldn't take all the excitement," Kryholt said. "Eight years of absolute solitude got him out of the habit of seeing people. Our arrival got him worked up and put an overload on his heart. He died in his sleep a few minutes ago."

"Well, at least he'll get a decent burial from us," I said. "On your way out, tell Hammermill about it, and have him send a couple of men outside to dig a grave near the wreck."

AHERNE and Fremantle dug the grave, not far

from the crumpled nose of the EMPRESS OF SATURN, and just before sundown we held the burial service. We wrapped the old man in a sheet of plastifilm, lowered him gently into the grave, and planted a cross; I didn't know whether he would have wanted the cross or not, but I figured it was a good thing to do anyway.

I said a few words over the grave—nothing much; I've never been too good in the speech-making department—and we trooped back to our own ship. Long shadows were slanting across the clearing now, as the sun got lower in the sky.

The planet had no moon, and the sky was as black as I've ever seen anywhere, broken only by the brightness of the stars. We spent an uneasy night. There was plenty of noise in the jungle, and even though we had the ship shut up tight as a clam I couldn't help shivering at the thought of those creatures in the forest, those degenerate sons of mankind, with their extra limbs and dappled skins and bulging heads and all the oth-

er weird deformities I had seen earlier.

They had even been watching us while we performed the burial; I had seen them lurking behind the trees, eyeing us with their piercing stares, and I was doubly glad I had ordered all men to wear side-arms outside the ship.

So far the mutants had not made a single aggressive gesture toward us, but I remembered Matson's vivid tale of the war between the mutants and the normals—a war that had ended in almost total extermination of the normals.

When morning came, we found that Matson's grave had been opened and the body was gone.

Hammermill made the discovery, while the rest of us were waking up. Sid had gone outside to have a look around and get some morning air. He came back to the *Marie* on a bound, shouting, "They've opened the grave! They've opened the grave!"

We came flocking out to see. The cross was down, and the grave had indeed been dug up—not with shovels, it

seemed, but with hands and feet, the way a dog would dig up a bone. Heaps of loose soil had been sprayed all over, and the only thing in the grave was the plastifilm we had wrapped the body in.

"The filthy ghouls," Kryholt muttered. "They must have come during the night, while we slept—"

The grisly grave-robbing episode cast a pall of gloom over us all morning. The old man had been a game fighter, and he deserved to remain at rest. Although simply to look at them was to be convinced of the hellishness of the mutants, this incident clinched in our minds the fact that they were a degraded form of life that no longer could be thought worthy of being called "human."

Hammermill, Fremantle, and Brecht, the three men who had been assigned to repairing the drive stabilizer, worked like demons all morning. I didn't discourage them from working hard, either. I wanted to get off this foul planet just as fast as we could get the ship safely aloft.

It was early in the after-

noon when Tim Aherne came to me and reported that no one had seen Danny Tsung since lunch.

"I thought he was working with Fremantle and Brecht on the stabilizer," Aherne said. "But when I went looking for him up front they told me they thought he'd been working with *me*, cleaning out the rocket tubes. And he isn't in the radio room with Sparks, he isn't with Kryholt, he isn't with Mike Thorne in the control room. So where is he?"

"We'd better find out in a hurry." I yanked down on the gong-handle that sounded a general alarm, and waited for everyone to come running. Sparks was there first, then Kryholt, then the three from the stabilizer compartment. Following Hammermill in came Mike Thorne. I counted up. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, and I made the eighth. The *Marie* carried nine. One was missing—Tsung. Where was he?

"Anybody seen Danny?" I demanded.

"Not since lunch, skipper," Sparks said.

"I thought he was working on the rocket tubes, Johnny," Hammermill said.

"And I thought he was up front," said Aherne.

"Maybe he took a walk over to the other ship," Kryholt suggested. "Looking for a souvenir from the EMPRESS OF SATURN, or something like that."

"Maybe," I admitted tightly. "I think we'd better have a look. Aherne, Brecht, come with me. The rest of you stay busy. And yell if you notice anything peculiar going on outside."

FULLY armed, Aherne, Brecht and I left the *Marie* and headed for the wrecked liner. I was worried. Danny Tsung was the newest member of our crew—he had signed on voyage before last—and though he was only a fuel technician, and therefore not essential to our safety, I hated to lose him. And somehow I knew that something had happened to him—something nasty.

We reached the EMPRESS. I cupped my hands to my

mouth and yelled, "Danny! Danny Tsung!"

No answer.

I yelled again, hoping to see his grinning yellow-skinned face come popping out of a porthole high up on the liner, but there was no response. Aherne and Brecht joined in, and we shouted until mocking echoes drifted back from the dark forest.

No Danny. No sign of him at all.

Then Brecht bent, picked up something, and waved it in the air for us to see. "Look here!"

"What's that?"

"A strip of leather. Torn from Danny's jacket. It was lying here on the ground."

I looked toward the forest. Unseen eyes seemed to be looking back at me. "I think," I said in a quiet voice, "that we'd better organize a bigger searching party to look for Danny."

We returned to the ship and I showed them what we had found. Then we split up to look for him. At my orders, Hammermill and Fremantle stayed behind to continue

working on the stabilizer repairs; the work had to go on, no matter what, or we'd never leave here. I divided the rest of us into three teams of two: Brecht and Sparks, Aherne and Thorne, Kryholt and myself.

"Remember," I warned them as we set out. "Keep your blasters where you can reach them, and sing out if you get into any trouble."

We advanced into the forest, Brecht and Sparks going south of the wreck, Aherne and Thorne going north, while Doc Kryholt and I struck out westward.

We moved cautiously, staying ten to fifteen feet from each other, looking in all directions before we took each step. I kept anticipating mutants dropping from the trees or materializing out of concealed pits. We continued into the forest for nearly a quarter of a mile without seeing anything noteworthy.

Then Kryholt branched off a little, taking a side-fork to my right. I kept one eye on him, because I didn't want to get separated.

Suddenly I heard him shout. There was the sound of a scuffle in the underbrush, the bright flare of a blaster-bolt going off, and a high-pitched, unearthly scream of pain. Then, the sound of creatures beating a hasty retreat through the vegetation.

When I reached Kryholt finally, he was doubled over, upchucking his lunch. He held up one hand. "I found him. You better not look."

It was too late; I had already looked. It was not pretty. I have often wondered what sight there is loathsome enough to make a doctor lose his lunch, and now I know. I was quickly and unpleasantly sick.

Kryholt said, "There were four or five of the mutants crouched over him. They were—eating him. I got one and the rest escaped."

A mutant lay sprawled some twenty feet further away, with a charred hole blown through his middle. It was a particularly ugly mutant, with a sleek-skinned reptilian body covered with glossy blue scales.

I did not look at Danny's

body. One glance had been enough to imprint the image on my mind forever: the head and shoulders of Danny Tsung still intact, the face still smiling even in death—and the rest of the body a bloody mess, gnawed to the bone in some places, as though the mutants had gathered round, jostling each other away to grab up handfuls of his still-warm flesh.

"What are we going to do with the body?" I said. "If the men see it—"

"The men won't see it. I'll cremate it with my blaster," Kryholt said. "It's the best way. This isn't a sight for sane eyes to see."

Opening his weapon to wide-blast, Kryholt rayed the corpse to ash. "All right," he said finally. "We can go back now."

WE returned to the ship and I sounded the siren that meant *all-hands-get-back-aboard*. A few minutes later, Aherne, Brecht, Sparx, and Thorne returned from their explorations, and I told them the news.

"Killed and eaten," Fre-

mantle repeated. "Killed and eaten. And these things are the children of human beings!"

"How did they catch him?" Hammermill asked.

"He must have wandered away from the ship after lunch," I said. "And the mutants were waiting—hidden behind the wreck, maybe—"

"The hellish fiends!" Thorne rumbled. He had been a close friend of Danny's. "We ought to kill them all! Trail the ship over the jungle and blast them into atoms with our rocket-wash!"

I shook my head. "The smartest thing to do is just to finish up the repairs and get the deuce out of here. Let the Galactic Government worry about cleaning up the mutants."

"No, dammit!" Thorne cried. "They killed Danny. I'm going to even the score."

He started out the main hatch. I called after him, "Thorne! Thorne, get back inside here!"

"Sorry, Captain. This is personal!"

He leaped to ground level. I rushed out after him. He was

racing toward the forest, his blaster out and firing. As usual, there had been mutants peering at us from behind the trees. Thorne's wild fusillade of blaster bolts killed at least three of the beings before I could catch up with him. The rest of the mutants fled.

I slapped the blaster out of his hand. His face was white, his eyes strange.

"Have you gone nuts, Thorne? Get back in the ship on the double!"

He nodded, panting breathlessly. "Okay, Skipper. I got some of them, at least. That's all I wanted."

He returned to the ship. I followed him in, looking behind me—just in case.

I gave orders that nobody was to leave the ship for any reason at all. Just to make sure, I went around to each man on board and asked him privately to keep an eye on one other man; I didn't want anybody slipping off into the forest to carry out a one-man vendetta in vengeance for Danny. I wasn't interested in vengeance, just in getting away

from this planet, and one casualty was a lot more than sufficient.

Hammermill and Fremantle worked practically round the clock on the stabilizer, and by the next morning Hammermill pronounced the job done.

"We'll run some static tests today," he reported to me. "If everything's okay, we can blast off before nightfall."

"I hope so."

An hour later, I had even more reason to hope so. Brecht came to my quarters and asked if I had looked out one of the viewports lately. I said I hadn't, I had been too busy.

"Take a look, Skipper. Take a look right now."

I unshuttered my port and had a look.

"Good Lord," I muttered. "Mutants—t h o u s a n d s of them!"

They were all around—advancing slowly toward the ship, coming out of the forest. Incredible hordes of them. It was a scene out of the Inferno.

I stared for a long moment at the procession of what I could only think of as living corpses: the creatures with

two heads, the creatures with practically none, the creatures whose skin glowed with phosphorescent brightness. Several of the mutants crawled on all fours—all sixes, I corrected, as I saw the extra limbs. They were blasphemous travesties of the human form. And there were thousands of them. The whole mutant population of the forest appeared to have massed for this attack on us.

I sounded the general alarm. "Check all hatches!" I called out. "Tighten the ports! Dog down the airlocks all around!"

The crew hove to, making the ship spacetight. By this time the mutants had reached us. They swarmed over the ship like a horde of nauseous vermin. Looking out the port, I could see them on the landing-fins, on the outside of the rocket-tubes. One wriggled right past the port I was looking through, climbing toward the nose of the ship with sucker-attachments that sprouted from his limbs, and when he had passed a trail of slime obscured the view.

I could hear their shrill cries of hate and the steady

hammering of their fists against the sides of the ship.

Hammermill, in the drive compartment, said, "It's risky to take off without checking the stabilizers, Johnny."

"It's a hell of a lot riskier to stay here," I said. "There are thousands of those creatures outside. If enough of them get on us, their weight may tip the ship over, maybe even crack the hull—" I shuddered. "I'd rather be lost in space than be eaten alive by the mutants," I said. "We'll risk the blastoff."

Hammermill shrugged. "Right-o. When do you want to leave?"

"How about right now?" I said.

OUTSIDE the ship, pandemonium was reigning. A vast mob of shouting mutants surrounded us, trying to get inside the ship, trying to get us out. They clung to the landing-fins, and several of them had reached the nose of the ship and hung there. It might have been my imagination, but I seemed to feel the *Marie* swaying from side to side dizzily as though the mutants

were on the verge of tipping us over.

Even though I was repelled and revolted by the horde of monsters outside, I was fascinated at the same time by their very hideousness. Heredity had run riot in bringing these creatures into being. I saw creatures with no eyes and creatures with ten, creatures whose bodies were so fleshless they looked like walking skeletons and creatures so wrapped in fat they could barely move. And each of the mutants had the aspect of death about him—death and corruption and degradation.

I gave the *ready-for-blast-off* signal and every man in the ship got to his station. Now the ship definitely *was* swaying; it was no easy trick to tip over a three-hundred-foot spaceship, but there were thousands of mutants outside, and mobs are capable of doing almost anything—especially an unhuman mob like this one.

The countdown echoed through the ship. *Ten...nine...eight...*

Three...two...

One...!

Groaning under the weight of the dozens of mutants clinging to her skin, the *Marie* belled her thunder-roar of blastoff. In the control cabin, I watched the indicator needles spin. They came dangerously close to *overload* and automatic cut-off before we lifted an inch from the ground. Carrying hundreds of extra pounds of mutants, we might not be able to get aloft.

The rockets roared. The ship quaked and bucked, rising a few feet into the air. I gave the jets full power, and acceleration slammed at us.

Switching on the rear teleview, I saw a bizarre scene. We were a hundred feet off the ground, a hundred fifty, two hundred—and we were raining mutants. They were dropping from our sides as the ship sprang spaceward, tumbling down in sprawling pinwheels of arms and legs and tentacles, landing with crushing impact on the ground below.

The flaming splash of our rocket-wash had bathed hundreds below with flame. I saw the still living ones milling

around, their bodies aflame, while one enormous area was simply one charred pit of destruction.

As the monsters dropped off, our weight-load lightened, and the rockets were able to function. By the time we had left the planet's atmosphere, the ship was moving normally and well.

Two days later we passed the Sinabar system and stopped at an orbiting space station outside Sinabar VI to have the ship overhauled and the drive stabilizers checked out. While we waited, we discovered that one of the mutants had become fouled in our antenna hoists and had remained with us on our journey through space, frozen, dead, a ghastly souvenir of our visit.

I sent Fremantle up on magneshoes to clear the dead creature away and destroy it. We didn't need any tangible souvenirs. We had enough memories to last us the rest of our lives, of the wreck of the *EMPRESS OF SATURN* and of the world of living corpses.

THE END

BIRTH OF A MONSTER

by RICHARD STARK

Those ghastly ghouls that have escaped the grave by feeding on a diet of blood from the living are the deadly enemies of all mankind, the unholy vampires

HE was sound asleep when the phone rang. He woke up, suddenly and completely, between the first and second rings, and lay with his eyes open, staring at the ceiling above him in the darkness, wondering why he had awakened.

The phone jangled again. Reaching out, he fumbled for the chain on the lamp beside his bed, found it, blinked at the sudden yellow light. The alarm clock said just past two thirty. By the third ring, he was sitting beside the bed, pawing with his toes for his slippers.

He left the bedroom, walked down the dark hall toward the dining room, promising himself yet again that he would definitely see about having an ex-

tension phone put in the bedroom. After all, a doctor, general practitioner—although it had been over three months since he had last been called so late. An emergency, that time. A drunken husband, a long, narrow flight of stairs—four bones broken and an hysterical wife.

He wondered what it would be this time. As the fourth ring began, he picked up the phone, said, "Doctor Lamming."

It was a man's voice. He didn't sound at all excited. "Doctor, my wife is about to have a baby. There's no time to get to the hospital. I have no car. If you could come—"

He didn't recognize the voice, couldn't remember any pregnancies due for two or three weeks yet. He said, "Is



your wife one of my patients?"

There was a pause, then, "No," said the voice. "We just moved in, we're new in town. Can you come?"

"Certainly. What's the address?"

"Four fifty two Larchmont. At the top of the hill."

"The old estate?"

"Yes. We've just moved in."

"I'll be there in half an hour. Maybe less."

"Thank you, doctor."

He hung up, hurried back to the bedroom and dressed. He knew the estate, at the end of Larchmont Road. Empty for years. He hadn't known anyone had moved in. Who would want to move in there? Artists, perhaps. Thinking the place was "quaint". Probably planning to renovate, modernize, surprise their friends from the city. More and more commuters were moving into town, and a lot of them had strange tastes.

The office was in the front of the house. He stopped and loaded the bag, hurried out, leaving the cabinet doors open in the dark house behind him.

His car was in the garage. He climbed in, backed out to

the street, left the garage open and hurried across town.

Larchmont Drive was a long, winding road, flanked by old gabled structures and new ranch-style one-story homes, the meeting of old and new, the locals and the commuters. The road wound and wiggled its way up the hill, ending at the great closed gates to the estate. If the estate had once had a name, once been associated with one particular owner, the name was now lost and forgotten. The brooding building at the top of the hill was now known only as "the estate". Not even a capital letter. It didn't even attract children, it didn't even have a reputation for being haunted. It was only a lonely and empty shell, stuck away on the top of the hill. Its walls were gray-black from lack of paint, its front windows, facing west, shone orange in the late afternoon, but were dull black the rest of the time.

Doctor Lamming drove up the road, noticing that the huge wrought-iron gates were open now, for the first time in his memory. He drove through and

on up the curving, pitted road to the estate.

There was no light. He got out of the car, holding his leather bag, and looked at the place, wondering if this call were only some practical joker's impractical idea of a joke. Then he saw a light moving within the house, and the heavy front door whined open.

There was a man there, holding in his hand a kerosene lamp. He said, "Doctor Lamming?"

"Yes. Coming." He trotted up the warped steps and across the rail-less pillared verandah to the door.

THE man was short and thin and sallow. He might have been thirty, or forty, or fifty. His hair was black and straight and rather long, and his face was long and thin, with prominent cheek-bones, deep-set eyes and thin, bloodless lips. The thin lips smiled slightly and he said, "We just moved in. No electricity as yet."

"Water?"

"Yes. We have our own well. My wife is upstairs."

It was the first time Doctor

Lamming had ever been inside the building. The weak kerosene lamp showed very little, but he caught glimpses, as they moved down the wide central hall to the staircase, of high-ceilinged, barren rooms, of occasional pieces of ancient, dust-covered, sheet-draped furniture, of curtainless windows and silence and emptiness.

The other man said, "Our furniture hasn't come yet. Most of it. Just enough for the one bedroom."

Doctor Lamming noticed, now, a faint, undecipherable accent in the other man's speech. He couldn't quite place it. He said, "By the way. I don't know your name."

The other stopped at the foot of the staircase and turned, his right hand extended. "I'm terribly sorry, Doctor. I'm not thinking straight. Cargill is my name. Anton Cargill."

They shook hands, and Doctor Lamming was surprised at the coldness and thinness of Cargill's hand. And, too, though Cargill claimed he wasn't thinking straight, though he claimed his wife

was upstairs, about to give birth, the man's voice and manner and tone were completely blank, completely unemotional.

Cargill turned away and climbed the stairs to the second floor, the doctor behind him. At thirty two, with six years of general practice behind him, Doctor Lamming considered himself reasonably used to the vagaries and variety of human beings, but this complete lack of emotion from an expectant father was something new. He said, "Your first child, Mr. Cargill?"

They had reached the top of the stairs, and Cargill led the way to the left. "Yes," he said. "As a matter of fact, it came as something of a surprise. We had been under the impression that it was—impossible for us."

"It sometimes takes a while," said the doctor.

Cargill walked into the bedroom, and the doctor followed. There were already three kerosene lamps in the room. The furniture was old-fashioned, massive-looking, chests and dressers and chairs and, in the center of the room, a huge canopy bed. The woman lay on the

bed, her eyes closed, her black hair spread out against the pillow, her face as pale and white as her husband's in the light of the lamps. The doctor put his bag down on the table beside the bed, and the woman groaned, moving her head.

Cargill stood beside the bed, looking without expression at his wife. "Soon now, I think," he said.

"Yes," said the doctor. "If you would—towels, hot water. Lots of both."

"Of course," said Cargill. Taking one of the lamps, he left the room.

The woman on the bed was undoubtedly in labor. She groaned again, and murmured, but Doctor Lamming couldn't make out what she had said. He stripped the blanket away, and saw that Cargill had been right. Soon now. He took his tools from the bag, wrapped in a towel, spread them out on a table, his own stainless steel equipment, the two silver scalpels that had been his father's, that he now carried more as good luck charms than anything else, memories of his father, who had been the Doctor

Lamming in the town before him, and in whose footsteps he had striven to walk.

The woman was in pain. He worked rapidly, not noticing the odd, the strange, the unbelievable, not noticing anything but the work he was doing. The baby didn't seem to want to be born. It was difficult, it was long and exhausting, but finally he held the infant in his hands. The child breathed, it weakly moved its chubby fists, but it did not cry out.

He set the child down and stared. He had been working with such absorption, had been so blind to everything aside from his own movements and the movements of the child, that now he could do nothing but stare, with shock and disbelief.

It had been a bloodless birth. A birth completely without blood. And now, as he stared with horror at the woman's face, her eyes closed and her mouth open as she lay in exhausted sleep, he knew what this woman was. He looked at the sharp, pointed teeth, the long, fang-like canines, the pale lips, the chalk-white face, and

he knew just what she was.

And what he had to do. The furniture in the room was old, some of it was beaten and rickety. He grabbed a chair, wrenched at it, managed to pull one of the slats out of the back. He reached for a knife, one of the delicate instruments of his profession, he hacked at the slat of wood until one end of it was sharp and pointed. Turning, he closed his eyes and plunged the wooden stake into the sleeping woman's heart.

She moved, with a sudden lurching spasm, her cold arms beating against his face, and from her throat came the scream of the banshee, the scream of the doomed in Hell. He fell away from her, lost his balance, toppled to the floor. Rising, he saw that she was still, and that she was incredibly old.

He had to get away. He turned to the door, and Cargill was standing there, in one hand the kerosene lamp, in the other a handful of folded towels.

They stared at each other, and Cargill's eyes seemed to be alight with passion, with rage, with obscene lust.

Doctor Lamming backed away, bumping into the table on which lay his bag and his tools. He stared at the other with loathing and fear. "Vampire!" he screamed, and his voice echoed through the empty rooms of the house.

Cargill set down the lamp, dropped the towels on the floor. "Yes," he said. "A new world. *Our* new world, too. You'll never know how difficult it was to make the crossing. To a new world, where we are not hunted, where we are not known, where we are safe."

"You are known," the doctor told him. "You are not safe."

"Known only as legend." Cargill looked without emotion at the bed. "You have killed my wife," he said. "But I will have a new wife. And first I will have a new brother."

The doctor backed away again, around the table, clutching at the bag on the table, wondering if he could hurl the bag, duck, run around the man—the vampire—the *thing* before him, down the stairs, to safety.

"The gates are closed," Cargill told him. "You are mine."

And his arms moved up, above his head. But, no, his arms were stretched out, toward the doctor, and he rose, to the beat of dusty black wings, to swoop down upon the doctor.

The doctor screamed and pawed at the table. His father's scalpels! His hand touched one of them, and he brought it up, a glinting silver blade, and as the hungry mouth lunged down at him he pushed the blade deep into the other's neck.

Cargill slumped before him, clutching the doctor's coat, gasping oaths in a language the doctor had never before heard, and the doctor swung once more with the silver scalpel, driving it deep into Cargill's chest. Cargill screamed, and the monstrous wings fluttered, and the vampire lay dead.

Doctor Lamming staggered from the room. He had to get away, he had to get help, he had to call the police, there might be more of them here, more of them. In the darkness, without the lamp to guide him, he stumbled and ran along the upper hall, clattered and lurched and half-fell down the broad staircase, ran panting to

the front door and to his car.

The car started at the first try. He turned it around, backing, turning, then pressed the accelerator to the floor and the car leaped ahead, to race around the curving driveway to the road.

The gates were closed, as Cargill had said. He hit the brakes, shoving downward with his foot, and the car squealed and swerved to a stop inches

from the gates. He got out of the car, ran to the gates, pushed on them, and they started to open.

Something brushed his face. He turned and looked up, and it hovered just above him, its tiny dusky wings beating silently, and then it plunged and Doctor Lamming screamed his life away.

The baby.

THE END

TOWARD ABSOLUTE ZERO

The world's most powerful continuously operating electromagnet, designed for exploring the temperatures near absolute zero (459.6 degrees below zero Fahrenheit) is now in operation at the University of California. The new magnet will enable scientists to perform heretofore impossible experiments at a temperature fractions of a degree above the theoretically unattainable absolute limit. At very low temperatures liquid helium flows straight up, steel is as fragile as glass, electrical resistance disappears, and

other strange properties of matter develop.

The new equipment is based on a simple principle: since matter heats up when it is magnetized, it should grow cool when de-magnetized. The magnet, 26 inches in length and 15 inches in diameter, produces a magnetic field measured at the high figure of 96,700 gauss. By using it to build up huge magnetization which is then suddenly interrupted, the experimenters can reach within 0.05 degrees of absolute zero.

MAN-HUNTING ROBOT

by JAMES ROSENQUEST

One man alone on a planet of death. — A deadly robot made especially to pursue a human being. Was it just a cruel sport devised for some bloodthirsty pleasure?

HE gasped for breath, and its auditory cup picked up the spasmed inrush of air, a thousand yards away.

He sweated, and a vagrant current of wind carried the sticky molecules of human fear to its organic receptors.

He fled on padded feet, but the judas-call of a snapping twig betrayed his course.

He tried standing very still and holding his breath, but in the cold and brittle air of the surface level his heated body unfurled invisible banners of infra-red; its special photocells responded eagerly to 98.6 Fahrenheit and it struck out toward him once more like a blindfolded rattlesnake.

Then he heard the silken swish of rubberized wheels and the mocking chuckle of gears and relays. He peered through

the thorny limbs and leaves of the stinking mephitis-bush in which he had thought to find concealment, and saw the gleaming barrel body with the tiny insect-head top the nearest rise of lichen ground. It paused momentarily as if to savor victory (*foolish anthropomorphism*, Jon Pierce thought wildly, *for it's only a machine—but therein lies the very horror of its scientific sadism, devoid of pity and pleasure alike, like the medieval executioner to whom the screaming creature on the rack is just one more task in the day's routine of fire and blood*), then gathered speed as it swept down the gentle slope toward his futile refuge, flailing the air with its four-fold complement of surgical appendages: scalpel, scissors,



bone-saw and clamp.

Caution followed courage in swift desertion of a lost cause, and he bolted for open ground, leaving shreds of flesh and fabric on a dozen spiked branches. But panic had anesthetized him, and he was unaware of the ruby gouts that welled out through the holes in his tunic.

At the top of the opposite rise he glanced back over his shoulder at the hunting robot. Luck was with him for a change. The automaton was efficient, but it lacked flexibility and judgment. Charging straight for the spot where it had lately detected its fleeing prey, its own momentum carried it straight into the dense bush.

It ground to a stop with a mighty crash of irresistible metal against stubborn branches and became entangled, its three wheels spinning furiously into ruts in the soft earth. The wheels stopped momentarily, then went into reverse as it sought to back out of the obstruction, but they only cut deeper into the loamy soil.

Jon Pierce glanced at his wristwatch hopefully, then

despairingly: one more hour to go. One hour had already passed—sixty minutes of running nightmare, dodging, twisting and turning. Hiding like a hunted animal in this supergame of hound and hare on the blasted surface of the former pleasure planetoid of Sybaris.

He looked up at the sky. A silvery shape hung suspended a thousand feet up, like a vulture in chrome waiting to pick the bones that the robot would leave. This was the space yacht of Seigneur Duplessis, as he liked to call himself, one of the richest men of the Solar System, and powerful enough to indulge almost any whim.

Surrounded by his courtesans and courtiers, he was no doubt watching the play with bored amusement. Pierce shook his fist at the sky and cursed him, then dropped his arm limply in futility. No use blaming Duplessis. He had brought this on himself.

THE ad had said: *Wanted, young man, daring and courageous. Ten thousand credits for two hours' work.* And a telephone number.

Pierce applied. Few people worked anymore; the machines did everything. Nobody went unfed either; the welfare state provided for all. But it was not enough for him. He hated his plebeian status with all his soul and thirsted and hungered for the luxuries and freedom of the elite.

In his circle of friends they talked often of the ways of getting there: you hired yourself out for amusement purposes, or you joined one of the hit-and-run fleets of pirates that nibbled at the outer fringes of the System, or you were accepted by the Federated Worlds Police or one of the semi-official vigilante groups of private citizens.

Early in the twenty-first century, the double explosion of earth population and space travel had ripped the fabric of world society apart. Anarchy and hedonism competed with tyranny and puritanism. Automation rose on an exponential curve, until there was plenty for all and jobs for none.

A few became enormously wealthy in the exploitation of Mars and Venus. The growth

and confusion was beyond any real control. Economies and governments collapsed; super-states coalesced, dissolved, and reformed.

With the discovery of the Heisenberg antigravity field, chemical propellants were no longer necessary; escape velocity was a problem that no longer existed.

Space vehicles were turned out on the assembly line like cars; this was inevitable. And so it was also inevitable that craft would be stolen, and that thieves would get together, form marauding packs that preyed on interplanet commerce, and lose themselves in the depths of space, dodging through the asteroid belt between Mars and Jupiter or hiding in the honeycomb of vast caverns that underlay the lunar surface.

In one of the major battles of the marauders and the FWP, a band of space pirates had seized and used the pleasure world of Sybaris for a stronghold, and the gaudy planetoid had been ruthlessly razed in an indiscriminating holocaust of cursing outlaws

and screaming sybarites as the pleasure palaces collapsed in a sea of atomic fire. And now, on desolated Sybaris, he had put his life in jeopardy for two hours.

Out of a roomful of desperate, bored, greedy, grim-faced men, Pierce had been selected.

"I like your style," the Seigneur had said, permitting his granite visage the rare luxury of a thin-lipped smile. "But of course you realize that you may not come out of this alive?"

Jon had swallowed and whispered, "Yes, sir."

"Of course," his employer continued with a negligent wave of a thin hand, "if you succeed in eluding the robot for two hours, you have won a not inconsiderable sum—plus *entree* into upper society." At this, Jon's eyes had wavered to a nearby divan, where a stunning brunette was smiling at him encouragingly, her eyes taking in his lithe young form with undisguised interest. And so he had accepted.

HE heard a snapping and crackling sound, and

looked toward the bush. His heart sank.

Using its powerful clamp and saw, the robot was methodically clipping away the thorny branches that entangled it and dropping them into the ruts to form a firm matting, traction for its wheels. Jon swore again, bitterly. He knew that no robot was that adaptable or even programmed for such a contingency in its miles of magnetic tape and massed banks of tubes and transistors.

Quite obviously, the Seigneur Duplessis had no intention of losing either his prey or the ten thousand. New directions were being beamed into the monster from the circling space yacht.

Pierce shielded his eyes from the sun and looked toward the sharply curving horizon of the little world. Half a mile away, barely distinguishable from the surrounding hillocks, a cluster of eroded ruins glinted redly in the waning afternoon of the planetoid's short day. Without waiting to see if the hunting robot succeeded or failed in its efforts

to escape, he started to sprint. Half way there, he stopped to rest, regardless of the risk of lost time and space.

His heart pounded as if it would escape from its ribbed cage, and his lungs were bursting as they fought for oxygen in the cold, thin air of Sybaris. A red haze formed behind his eyes.

Five minutes elapsed, and then he saw once more, on a distant hillock, the ominous gleam of polished metal. The robot was free again and in full pursuit. He pumped his shaky legs with the leas of will power and continued his flight. Strength was gone, and only sheer nerve kept his legs pumping up and down, up and down, though his feet were so numb now that he could not feel the ground beneath him, and he laughed hysterically, briefly at the thought that he had become one robot fleeing from another.

He reached the ruins of the former pleasure city and flung himself into the dark maw of a shattered doorway and dodged behind the sagging lintel, just in time to see the robot wheel

into sight over the last elevation of ground and halt in a puzzlement that seemed almost human.

It was too good to be true, too fortuitous that he had outrun it again and found another shelter. He could not shake off the feeling that he was being played out like a fish on a line, in order to prolong the sport.

He heard a faint humming and peered upward through a crack in the wall. The yacht had swung low and was circling over the ruins, while the horrible insect-like head of the robot, bristling with antennas and detection apparatus, flickered with many-colored lights and gave off whirring and whistling noises.

More new programming. Time was running out, for the hunters as well as the hunted. Pierce looked again at his watch: forty-five minutes left. And he found himself again repressing the doubt that Duplessis would live up to his word.

He had been disillusioned once already. At the outset of the hunt, which seemed hours

ago instead of a mere seventy-five minutes; he had entertained the fatuous hope that it was just a grim joke, morbid but not fatal. *Surely they would not let the robot kill him if it caught up with him, so he thought.*

Until he saw the rust-red stains on the surgical claws—clues as to how the last hunt had ended. Obviously they had left the stains on, to disabuse him of any false hopes of last-minute mercy. They wanted him to put up a realistic struggle for survival. They found no thrill in make-believe. In this latter-day Roman arena, there were no *paper-mache* lions.

He took advantage of the one-way conversation between the robot and the yacht to look around the interior of his latest hideout. The rotted, crumbling walls still held patches of bright, radioactive paints, fragments and hints of former frescoes that would have put the notorious walls of ancient Pompeii to shame. But Pierce had no time or inclination to contemplate the varied diver-

sions that they flaunted before his restless eyes.

It had been a great banquet-and-orgy hall. Around the great table that ran its dusty length—a once-groaning festive board weighed down with all the delicacies of three worlds—charred skeletons sat or sprawled in the positions in which sudden death had joined them at the feast, over fifty years before; their huge and shadowy eye-sockets gazed down in eternal hunger at the sooted platters set before them, heaped high with crumbling cinders spiced heavily with ashes and dust.

As his eyes adapted to the interior gloom, Jon made out the shape of a grand staircase at the far end—a flight of blackened marble steps leading to some upper floor or suite. Grimacing with distaste at his grim company, he tiptoed past the rows of silent, fleshless guests.

Even here, in the ruins of former opulence and grandeur he felt out of place, uninvited, and the feeling forged his softening will into a new steeliness. What they had enjoyed, he

would enjoy, and nothing would stop him. He looked at his watch: forty minutes to go.

His footsteps muffled by the thick layers of dust that overlay the mosaic floor, he made his way to the staircase and ascended. Near the top, one of the crumbling risers gave way beneath his weight, and he barely succeeded in grabbing the wrought iron balustrade, pulling himself up hand over hand until he stood, shaking with fatigue, on the upper level.

He heaved a sigh of relief. Surely it could not follow him up here, on wheels, and with the stairs in that condition—they would not support the weight of five hundred pounds of robot. But he would take no chances. He sank to the floor as gently as he could and lay on his side, breathing in quick, soft gasps, and watching the dim outline of the entrance on the floor below.

IT had not lost much time. He heard the crunch of wheels on rubble; moving and stopping, then moving again,

as its battery of detectors picked up his spoor. Then there was a sudden glint of metal in the waning light outside the doorway, and a dreadful bulk stood limned in the sickly glow of twilight, a half-shadowy nightmare form whose very obscurity aroused more imagined horrors than if it had been in full sunlight.

He thought he could make out impatient twitchings of its surgical limbs, somehow like the palsied tremblings of an eager old man, half-witted but cruel and cunning, longing for the feel of trembling flesh. He could hear faint humming and clicking sounds, as if it were talking to itself.

Then—catastrophe. Jon sneezed.

A small but blinding beacon sprang into life on top of the knobby bulge that served as a head and swept over the charnel hall. Motors sprang into action with a muted roar that sounded like an exclamation of triumph, and the robot rolled forward, swinging its light in frenzied sweeps around the great hall so that blinding light alternated with sooty darkness

in Jon's eyes; until the painted figures on the walls seemed to writhe in an obscene dance and the skeletons twitched in their rotting chairs.

The automaton swept forward to the staircase, its flailing arms smashing at the startled dead until splintered bones flew through the air and skulls skidded through the dust and ashes.

It halted its triumphal march at the foot of the staircase and swept the new obstruction with its beam of polarized light. From his vantage point, Jon could look down on the busy control center of the death machine, closer than he had ever been to it since the hour when both had been set loose on the surface of Sybaris. From here he could make out a camera-like aperture with a great, gleaming lens of an eye, and knew that television pictures were being transmitted to the mother ship outside.

The message was received and the invisible answer sped back through the ether. There came a series of sharp clicks and then the three wheels fell away, revealing short, stumpy

legs terminating in broad discs for feet. The robot began to mount the stairs, slowly, inexorably, with ground-shaking tread, like the terrible golem of ancient times.

Jon did not wait to see whether the steps would support its weight, nor if it would negotiate the jagged hole that had opened up under his own feet.

He leaped to his feet and ran down the long corridor to the end, where three closed doors were barely visible in the thickening gloom. The first two were locked. The third opened to his fumbling touch and he almost fell inside. He slammed the door shut and groped for a bolt or lock of some kind, found a heavy metal bar and shot it home.

He leaned against the inside of the door, breathing heavily. Outside, silence had fallen again; he could not make out whether the robot had been stalled at the hole in the stairs or now stood on the upper landing and tried to pick up his trail.

He struck a match to inspect

the condition of his barricade, and in the flickering light saw something white and oblong tacked to the heavy oak panelling of the door. He held the match closer, and felt as if he had been plunged into ice-water. It was a small card, containing an inscription in a neat hand:

ABANDON HOPE ALL
YE WHO ENTER HERE!

The match sputtered and died, and the darkness that then descended was no blacker than his despair.

In a sudden frenzy, lighting match after match, he ran from wall to wall, exploring the surface concealed by heavy black drapes. Behind one of them he found a small door and flung it open eagerly and found himself in a once luxurious bathroom with a sunken bath of black marble. But this too was a dead end. The search was futile. Both rooms were windowless. The chase was nearing its end.

And as if to mock him again, another dusty little placard winked at him from a tarnished mirror over the wash basin:

POISON INSIDE WITH
THE COMPLIMENTS OF
THE HOUSE.

He realized now that they had anticipated every move. How many hunted predecessors of his had wound up in this cul-de-sac? The placards indicated that the trap had been set up long ago and used before, perhaps many times. It was a perfect coffin into which the killers had driven him. Duplessis could well afford to give his solemn promise to pay off—if. He had nothing to lose. The match went out and left him in darkness.

Jon sank to the floor in despair and buried his face in his hands, his mind full of paralyzing images of himself in the unbreakable clutch of the robot, bathed in the cold and merciless light of its headlamp, while the grisly instruments did their work before the television eye.

And doubtless, in the hovering pleasure yacht, the thrill-seekers would loll on silken cushions, feasting on rare viands while his flesh was torn and drinking red wines while his blood was spilled.

THEN, when he thought he had hit rock-bottom in his courage and resources, he began to rise to the surface again. A cold rage electrified his brain and steeled his weary body for a final effort. First, he would need a steady light of some kind in order to set up his defenses.

He felt his way out of the bath into the main room, struck one of the few remaining matches, and saw the bookcase he had passed over before in his desperate search for an exit. He snatched one of the books from the shelf, ripped out a number of dry and yellowed pages, crumpled them into a heap on the floor and set them afire.

In the corner near the bookcase he found a small wooden chair and smashed the dry and brittle wood into kindling, which he then fed carefully into the little paper fire. The flames ate greedily at the bone-dry wood and caught on; the fire grew larger.

On top of this, in turn, he placed rungs from the chair in criss-cross fashion and blew on them tenderly, almost lovingly,

until they too were crackling briskly. Now he had a fairly good source of light to work by.

He stood up and looked around. Everything now must be grist to the mill of his racing mind. There was nothing that could not serve some purpose, if only it was viewed with the right *gestalt*, or coordinating frame of thought. Everything was a tool to be used. Only trial would determine its adequacy.

He thought to look at his watch again and felt a thrill run through his veins. Only twenty minutes to go! Then he shrugged the thought aside as being of only academic interest. He could not afford to rely on the element of time or on the plighted word of gentlefolk, with whom he had heretofore not the slightest acquaintance.

He grinned tightly as he recalled the airy promises of Du-plessis and the enigmatic smile of the gorgeous brunette. To hell with them all! But enough of that for now...

In the flickering light of the small bonfire, he surveyed hi-

resources with a cynical eye: one bookcase, a heavy brocaded divan (quite useless as a barricade, he knew—the five hundred pound robot would easily push it aside), one other fragile wooden chair—

The floor quivered beneath his feet, and at the same time the heavy clumping resumed at the far end of the upper floor and approached his hiding place, growing louder as it neared, until it took on the dimensions of distant thunder. It had negotiated the shaky stairs and then detected the heat from his fire, and that was clue enough for it...

—and a number of large and heavy drapes. A plan formed swiftly in his mind. He panted and sweated in the smoke-filled atmosphere as he dragged the heavy divan to the nearest wall. He mounted it gingerly, clouds of dust rising beneath his feet from the rotting cushions, but the springs did not give way. His heart leaped as he heard a tentative scratching at the outside of the door. His mechanical nemesis was trying to turn the latch.

Exploring the tops of the

drapes, he found that they hung from traverse rods on heavy metal hooks. He detached three of them, dragged them over to the door, and hung them precariously by their hooks from the broad lintel. He gave an experimental tug and, to his immense satisfaction, they came loose easily and collapsed at his feet in heavy folds.

Then he heard the sound of retreating robotic feet, and knew that the monster was drawing back a short distance in order to gain momentum and smash its way through the door. He quickly replaced the drapes in front of the door and then, calculating rapidly, drew back the bolt and stepped to one side.

"Be my guest," he gritted out between clenched teeth.

The retreating footsteps stopped; there was a moment of portentous silence, and then the thing hurled itself rapidly down the corridor in a floor-shaking run and crashed against the door. It gave way with an ease that was unexpected and swung wide on its hinges. There was a moment

of breath-stifling terror while the barrel body loomed huge in the doorway and its many-jointed appendages reached out eagerly. Then—the drapes fell, covering the robot from head to foot, extinguishing its light, tangling in its limbs.

Its own momentum carried it on into the center of the room, where it whirled about angrily, buzzing and clicking, while the appendages struggled to be free of the blinding, hampering drapes. Jon coolly stepped through the open door and closed it behind him.

WHEN he emerged into the corridor and descended the grand staircase, night had fallen on Sybaris. He picked his way almost light-headedly through the great festive hall, treading on bones and kicking skulls from his path. He stepped outside at last and breathed deeply of the chilly air, ridding his lungs of smoke and spitting the taste of death out of his mouth.

The artificial moonlet of Sybaris, still glowing after half a century with its atom-powered luminescence, spinned

lazing five miles overhead and tinted the silent ruins with an eerie green.

Jon made his way down the fissured streets until he found another building more to his liking—one with several floors and many windows, from which he could jump if necessary. He did not know yet whether the chase was truly over.

He sat in an open window from which the panes of glass had long since vanished, and gazed up at the space yacht, which seemed to be circling about uncertainly, as if wondering what had happened both to the robot and its prey.

At last the distant humming grew louder and Jon could make out a row of lighted portholes as the ship settled to the ground just outside the ruins. A larger hole appeared in the side and poured out light, and a ramp swung out and down until it touched the ground.

Several figures emerged and descended, among them a tall figure that Jon assumed to be Duplessis. They entered the death trap he had so recently

escaped. It was then that he thought to look at his watch again, and in the green glow of the little moon saw that the two hours had elapsed, plus five minutes.

Shortly after, the figures emerged again from the wrecked building, followed by the robot, whose appendages seemed to hang dejectedly at its sides for all the world as if it had been chastised for its failure. The figures huddled in a group just outside the ship as if in consultation, and Jon could hear the faint murmur of voices. Then somebody went inside. A few seconds later a loudspeaker blared out.

"JON PIERCE, YOU HAVE WON! PLEASE REVEAL YOURSELF!"

He smiled grimly, but kept his silence. The message was repeated, then was followed by the assurance that the agreement would be kept. Then a feminine voice followed, cool and velvety: "Don't be a fool, Jon. Please show yourself. Nothing will happen to you."

Five more minutes elapsed, and then the men outside the ship were joined by three

more, making six in all. They fanned out through the ruins, carrying flashlights in one hand and what seemed to be weapons in the other. Jon nodded grimly to himself. He knew it would be this way! And he didn't know how he would get away this time. Robots could be outwitted. Men were much more dangerous.

He waited until he heard cautious footsteps on the floor below, then lowered himself out the window, hung briefly by his fingertips, then let go. The two-storey drop almost knocked the wind out of him, but he picked himself up and discovered that no bones were broken or ligaments torn. He crept on cat feet down the alley between two buildings, keeping to the bilious shadows cast by the green moonlet. He ducked into a doorway as a swinging light approached, waited until it disappeared from sight.

A few hundred feet away, a man's voice called out again: "If you can hear us, Pierce, for God's sake come out and show yourself! We can't leave you behind to starve!"

A good point, thought Jon. If he succeeded in eluding them, and they left him behind, he had only put off the end for a little while longer. He had to plan on action of some sort.

Working on the assumption that all the male members of the crew were out looking for him, he doubled back and headed for the pleasure yacht. Once inside, he could force the woman to pilot the craft for him; or, if she did not know how, he could hold her as a hostage and allow the admittance of one competent pilot. Once he was safely back on earth, one of the crew could return to Sybaris and pick up the members stranded there.

He almost succeeded. He stood in the doorway of the ship, congratulating himself on his stratagem and enjoying the startled look on the brunette's face, when he heard a tiny *zing* and felt a needle-sharp something nestle between his shoulder blades.

The prick was almost instantly replaced by an area of numbness that spread with astonishing rapidity—indeed, be-

fore he could even turn around or cry out—and plunged his brain into swift sleep. He barely had time to complete the indignant thought that this was not fair—not fair at all...

HE woke up with considerable surprise. He was still alive! He felt a cot beneath him and a light blanket thrown over him. There was no sensation of weightlessness. He could only assume he was back on earth. He sat up and surveyed the cubicle that confined him, when the door opened and Seigneur Duplessis entered, followed by the brunette and one other man.

Jon was startled. They were all clad in simple, form-fitting grey tunics. No jewels, no furs, no silks. And the languid expressions had vanished from their faces, to be replaced by a new look, one of grim determination and supernormal alertness.

Jon stood up, surprised by his own clear-headedness and re-found strength. He said in a clear voice: "Seigneur Duplessis, I have passed the trial by terror successfully beyond the

two hour time limit. I claim the reward of ten thousand credits, sir."

The older man smiled. "Sit down, son," he said, and pressed Jon firmly but gently back on the cot. "You'll get the ten thousand credits, but in twelve installments."

Jon looked blank, then indignant, and started to protest. The Seigneur turned to the brunette. "I think it is time for correct introductions."

"With pleasure," she acquiesced quietly. "Jon Pierce, meet *Colonel* Duplessis of Federated Worlds Police, Mars department." She gestured to the second man. "His aide, Captain Rademacher. And I am Lieutenant Hardinger—Sandra for short, if you wish."

"*You're from the FWP?*" Jon gasped.

"I'm afraid so," Colonel Duplessis admitted.

"Then what in the name of heaven was all this—this—hunting business?" Jon sputtered, half angry, half disappointed, as he saw his dreams of luxury and high society fly out the window. "Why did you try to kill me?"

"Look," Captain Rademacher interposed, nodding apologetically at the Colonel for the interruption, "the Solar System is in a desperate state—the earth is just one part of the big worry picture. Outlaws band together and tear and nibble away at the fringes of interplanetary society, like packs of rats. Local tyrants set themselves up wherever they can on the outer planets and moons and defy the Federation.

"On top of that, unscrupulous money-grabbers have been selling weapons and even small space craft to the Venusian natives—we can soon expect trouble from that corner. We can barely keep the lid on the whole bubbling mess."

"I feel for you," Jon broke in impatiently, "but come to the point."

"The point, Exactly." The brunette turned a dazzling smile on him. "The Federated Worlds Police is always in need of good men, for replacements if nothing else, let alone augmenting the present forces. If we fail, the whole System collapses in chaos. Law and or-

der and unity would break down, and in the not distant future, wars between the planets would be the next step."

"So I have been selected to volunteer?" Jon replied with sarcasm. "No thanks! I didn't bargain for a uniform!"

"I think you should know," the Colonel said softly (but Jon could detect the iron beneath the velvet glove), "that I have extraordinary powers of decision and action—*soldier*," and he emphasized the last word significantly. "You can volunteer your services, or you can be compelled. Considering your performance on the—ah—field of battle, we would rather have you as a volunteer than as a draftee."

"But why the elaborate rigmarole?" Jon asked, this time with more respect in his voice.

Colonel Duplessis sighed. "If you had had time to think it through, you would realize why. The challenges to the FWP are on a superhuman scale and demand the services of rather unusual men—men of great energy, determination, stamina, and intelligence. All of which you showed in good

measure, I might add." Jon felt a warm glow suffuse his body at this praise.

"Now," the Colonel continued patiently, in the manner of a man who has told the same story many times before, "in order to find men of this type, we must put potential applicants through the most stringent tests, demanding of them the last ounce of courage and skill. Hence the farce of the sadistic nobleman and the hunting robot.

"If the selected—ah—rookie is the word I believe they used two centuries ago?—if he knew that he was being tested for a position with an agency of law, he would blithely assume that he was never in any *real* danger, and that at the very end he would be snatched from the jaws of death. We would never know the man's reactions to genuine stress and danger, nor whether he was demonstrating his true potentialities."

Jon looked at the weary but strong face of the Colonel, the youthful energy of his aide—and, last but not least, the sincere and lightly smiling eyes of

Sandra. He frowned in the expectant silence that had fallen among the four of them, feeling his resentment melting away and his indecision giving way to a feeling of respect and camaraderie for these people.

He kissed his adolescent dreams goodbye, and became a man. "I accept," he said simply.

The Colonel slapped his thighs with satisfaction and stood up. "Signed, sealed, and delivered," he exclaimed. "Good boy!"

Captain Rademacher and Sandra followed their chief to the door. "Tomorrow," added the Colonel, standing in the doorway, "you will begin your *real* training, and will be introduced to the other members of your squadron," and he turned to leave.

"Er—sir?" Jon called after the tall, gaunt form.

Colonel Duplessis looked over his shoulder. "Yes?"

Jon frowned. "What if I had taken the poison that was supposed to be in the medicine

chest in that damned bathroom back on Sybaris—or was it really poison?"

The colonel's eyes grew very piercing, and his voice was like a rod of steel. "We had measured our man and knew he would not take the coward's way out. Oh yes, there was a deadly drug in the vial. This is not a game for children." He shrugged. "But we could probably have got to you in time, made you puke with a shot of emetine intravenously, and in due time returned you safe and sound to your little flat and your mess of pot-tage."

Jon shuddered a little. "And the robot," he added quickly, before Duplessis could leave; "the robot—would it really have tried to slice me up if it caught me?"

"Well," the Colonel replied, with a thin smile, "since it didn't happen, you'll never know for sure, will you?"

He went out, closing the door quietly behind him.

THE END

PLANET OF THE ANGRY GIANTS

by DIRK CLINTON

NOVELETTE

Illustrated by EMSH

The inhabitants of Dunhill V were gigantic. They were peaceful and good natured until something happened to upset them—and then their wrath was truly terrific!

COMMANDER Laurence Burke, who headed the Terran colony on the planet of Dunhill V, was a small man, as Earthmen went: he was a wiry figure no more than five feet six inches tall, with hardly an ounce of superfluous fat on his body. Despite the handicap of his size, Burke had been sufficiently adept at catching the attention of his superiors to reach his present fairly important post, as head of the tiny settlement on Dunhill V. There was one aspect of the Dunhill V assignment

that Commander Burke particularly relished: although he was by six inches the shortest Earthman in the settlement, that fact tended to be overlooked in the general scheme of things—for the simple reason that the natives of Dunhill V averaged around *eleven feet* in height, thus making all Earthmen look like dwarfs and making any individual differences in height seem insignificant.

Life was fairly quiet for the small band of Earthmen on Dunhill V. There were only



some hundred and fifty of them, living in temporary plastic domes. All the colonists were scientific observers, studying the planet's ecology and trying to determine whether it would be possible and desirable for Earth to send out a full-scale colonizing mission.

There were many factors to be considered: the climate, the edibility of the native foods, the problem of indigenous diseases, and—by far the most important—the attitude of the natives toward having another civilization settle practically in its midst.

So far, work was not quite complete on the various biophysical studies, but it seemed certain that the over-sized natives were going to be cooperative. They were enormous but gentle; the giants were very human in appearance, in all but their immense size.

They lived nomadic or pastoral lives in thinly-settled villages all over the planet, and during the first six months of the Terran colony's presence among them they had shown no hostility of any kind. They hardly seemed to care about the tiny beings that had come

to visit their planet.

One day rolled peacefully into the next for Commander Burke and his men. Each week they filed a progress report with Earth on their latest investigations and findings. The oversize aliens were causing quite a stir back home, it seemed. The news of their discovery had made the front page of every telefax sheet in the civilized galaxy. No intelligent humanoid life-form of such a size had ever been discovered before.

The news had caught the fancy of the general public. Commander Burke sighed pessimistically when he heard of the reaction. He knew that now he could anticipate the arrival of trouble.

And, sure enough, trouble arrived—right on schedule.

BURKE was compiling the weekly report when the first harbinger of trouble showed up. It was a warm morning, the temperature already in the high eighties and mounting higher—Dunhill V's sun was a young golden star that gave off plenty of heat,

and even in the polar regions that temperature rarely got much below fifty. Burke worked rapidly, efficiently, checking through the reports from each of his subdepartments and putting his final okay on them before they were transmitted to Earth.

Report on Flora and Fauna... Meteorological Findings... Relations with the Natives... Geological Report... Report of Medical Observations...

Burke added his signature to each of the reports in turn and stacked them in their place. A knock on the flimsy panelling of his office door interrupted his concentration suddenly.

"Come in" he said sharply. "Who is it?"

'Looking up, he saw it was Ledderman, one of the non-coms from the Signal Department. He was just a kid, out on his first interstellar expedition, and his pale face reflected the tension he felt on barging into the Commanding Officer's quarters.

"Sir—"

"I'm not ready for you yet, Mr. Ledderman. You can tell

your boss I'll have the report ready for transmission at 1100 hours, as usual. It's only 0945 now."

"I know, sir. I didn't come to pick up the report, sir. You see, sir—"

"Well?"

The boy got control of himself. "Sir, Lieutenant Hastings sent me over here to tell you that a spaceship from Earth has just requested landing clearance at our spaceport."

Burke's eyes widened. "An official ship?"

"No, sir. A p-private one. And Lieutenant Hastings says there's a second ship crossing the orbit of the outermost planet now, and heading here too!"

Burke frowned. "Did the ship say what it wanted on this planet?"

"No, sir. It simply requested landing clearance at our spaceport."

Burke bit deeply into the stem of his pipe. This was all very irregular, he thought. Private ships had no business here until the planet was officially opened for commerce, and that was some time yet in the future.

But, on the other hand, Burke considered, someone had spent a lot of money to come out here, and no very great harm would be done by allowing a brief landing. Especially if the visitor happened to be a junketing member of the Galactic Congress, or someone else of similar influence back home.

Sighing, Burke said, "All right. Tell Hastings he can give the ship clearance. But make sure he lets the ship know that we reserve the right to revoke its landing permission at any time."

TWO hours later, a seventh ship stood on the colony landing field, not far from the six big ships in which the members of the colonizing group had come, six months previously. The new ship was far smaller than the expedition's vessels, which were capable of holding fifty passengers a piece; this was only an eight-or-ten passenger ship. Even then, it was too big for its occupants—or occupant, since there was only one.

He was a rugged, powerful-

ly-built man who introduced himself as Arnold Slater the moment he entered Commander Burke's office. Slater was well over six feet tall, and he stared down at the diminutive Burke with an expression of mingled surprise and mockery. Burke met his stare evenly, reminding himself that Slater, for all his brawn, was smaller than a native child.

"I'll make the purpose of my visit clear as briefly as I can," Slater rumbled, seating himself opposite Burke and knotting his thick hands together.

"Yes. Please be brief," Burke said a trifle waspishly. "I happen to be quite busy."

Slater nodded. "Are you familiar with the name of Harris Reynard, Commander?"

"I can't say that I am."

Slater looked momentarily disconcerted. He said, "I suppose that's because you've spent most of your time out here in the far solar systems, Commander. But Harris Reynard is a leading Terran entrepreneur of entertainment, with contracts on a hundred civilized worlds. He's connected with half a dozen different

forms of entertainment—of which one of the most important is his circuit of championship boxers. Do you follow me, Commander?”

“I think so,” Burke said dryly, puffing at his pipe to conceal his displeasure.

“As for myself, Commander,” Slater went on, “I’m one of Mr. Reynard’s close associates. Which is why he’s entrusted me with this mission.”

“And the purpose of your mission is—?”

Slater smiled—a cold, malevolent smile. “Mr. Reynard and I have followed with a great deal of interest the published reports of your findings here. Especially the discovery of a race of giant humanoid beings, intelligent and of enormous size. Mr. Reynard has sent me here for the purpose of obtaining one or two of these natives for taking part in boxing exhibitions.”

Burke gasped so sharply he nearly dropped his pipe. “You can’t be serious!”

Slater’s face took on a smug expression. “Mr. Reynard and I think the idea has great possibilities. We could stage contests in which two of the gi-

ants boxed each other—or in which one of them took on ordinary-sized boxing champions—”

“The whole idea is incredible,” Burke said flatly. “The natives of this planet are utterly peacelike creatures. They aren’t boxers.”

“We could train them,” Slater chuckled. “Mr. Reynard has all the galaxy’s best fight trainers on his payroll.”

“No. It’s out of the question for you to remove any natives from this planet.”

“I don’t need your permission. If they’re intelligent beings, they have the right to go wherever they want to go, and you can’t interfere if I want to offer them a legitimate contract—”

“I *can* interfere,” Burke said crisply. “This planet is still under my absolute jurisdiction. And while it is, no outsiders are going to meddle with the native life—least of all, to remove any of the people. That’s my final decision. It won’t do you any good to argue.”

“Look here,” Slater grunted. “Mr. Reynard’s an impor-

tant man. He won't take this lying down. He's got big friends in the Galactic Congress—"

"I don't give a damn if his cousin is the Galactic President," Burke snapped. "Let him go use his influence on somebody else. Until this planet is opened for private exploration, Reynard will just have to keep his filthy hands off the natives."

Slater stood up, his face an icy mask. Commander Burke remained seated, thus minimizing the difference in their heights. Slater said darkly, "Mr. Reynard don't like to be crossed. I came right out to the edge of nowhere to get those aliens, and—"

"And you're going to go lickety-split back to your boss with your tail between your legs," Burke shot back. "You've had my final answer. Your landing permission is revoked. Get yourself off this planet as fast as you can, Slater."

"I'm entitled to an overnight stay by Galactic law," Slater retorted. "My engines need checking."

Burke scowled. The law of

overnight stay was universal; little as he cared for Slater, there was no way he could argue, once he had granted original landing permission. "All right, then. Stay overnight, if you want. But if I catch you monkeying around with the natives, I'll clap you in brig so fast you won't know what happened to you. Now get out of here!"

SLATER left, favoring Burke with an ugly glare before he closed the door. The Commander sighed and mopped the beads of sweat from his forehead.

What a filthy business, he thought. He had not told the truth when he said he had never heard of Harris Reynard. Of course he had; everyone in the galaxy knew of Reynard, the multi-billionaire entertainment entrepreneur who had begun with dirty three-dimensional postcards and worked up to an empire of vice and sensationalism that spanned a hundred worlds. Naturally it would occur to Reynard to stage some sort of boxing exhibition involving the giant beings of Dunhill V.

The worst of it was, Burke thought, that even though it was possible to slam the door in Reynard's face now, the refusal could only be temporary. Once this planet was opened up to private enterprise, once the giants were declared an intelligent race, Reynard could send half a dozen slimy Slaters in here and sign up the natives to any sort of contract, and so long as he met the laws of galactic employment practices there wouldn't be a thing anyone could do to stop him.

But at least I stopped him now, Burke thought. For whatever good that does.

Burke glanced out his office window, which faced the spaceport area. Slater was trudging across the clearing toward his ship. Burke shook his head sadly. It was never wise to cross a man as powerful as Harris Reynard—but, on the other hand, it was utterly impossible to hand any of the natives over to Reynard's underling without a formal okay from home.

Reynard would probably make trouble over this, Burke thought gloomily. A few

strings pulled and the home office would transfer Burke to some frigid ice-ball of a world, or to a super-tropical place where a man rotted from the warmth in a month. *Let him, Burke thought defiantly. At least I did what I thought was right.*

He switched on his communicator and dialed the channel of the colony's signal office. Ensign Ledderman answered the call.

"Yes, Commander?"

"Is Hastings there?"

"Just a moment, sir."

There was a click and the voice of Lieutenant Hastings, the colony's chief signal officer, said, "Yes, Commander Burke?"

"What's the latest on that second spaceship, Lieutenant?"

"A hundred thousand miles up, and going into a landing orbit, sir."

"Let me know when it lands."

"Yes, sir."

"On the other ship, the one that came down a few hours ago—I've revoked its landing permission. The pilot pulled

Overnight Stay on me, but I want him to get out first thing in the morning."

"Right, sir."

Burke broke the contact and turned away, clenching his fists impotently. He felt hampered by the law—the law that said any Terran ship was entitled to land at any Terran-settled spaceport planet. Requesting landing permission was only a formality. He could get into serious trouble for refusing it, even though the ships declined to tell him what their purpose in coming here might be.

He thought again of Slater and his plan to sign up the giant aliens as boxers. The thought made Burke furious. He turned back to his work.

He was still hard at work, some hours later, when the second spaceship landed.

LIKE Slater's ship, this was a small one, with a capacity of less than a dozen passengers. Also like Slater's ship, this one had a combined crew and passenger list of exactly one.

He was closer to Burke's

size, a small, rabbit-looking man with unhealthy yellow skin. He darted beady little eyes all around the office and said in a staccato, chattering voice, "Slater's been here already. I know he has. the tricky bastard! What sort of deal did you make with him? He didn't tie the planet up with an exclusive, did he? I could murder him for taking that shortcut! I started out first, but he—"

Commander Burke decided it was about time to cut short the flow of words. "Just one moment, Mr.— I didn't get the name—"

"Colville. Dan Colville, affiliated with W. H. Annebale's Zoological Park. I—"

"Please, Mr. Colville. Will you calm down and tell me why you've come here—slow enough so I can manage to understand each word?"

The rabbit-like little man took a deep gulp of Dunhill V's oxygen-rich atmosphere. "Well. We got the word about this planet of yours—it was all in the Earth papers, you see. And Mr. Annebale—he runs the Zoo, maybe you've heard

about it, largest private Zoo in the entire galaxy— Mr. Annebale says to me, 'Colville, we've *got* to get a couple of those creatures for our exhibition.'

"So he packs me up and sends me off here, but somehow that snake Slater found out I was heading here, and *he* decided to get into the act too and get a couple of the big beasts for Reynard's circuits, and then the low-life short-cuttled me and got here first, but if he signed any exclusive contracts with you I'm going to raise the biggest damn stink this side of—"

"Slater signed no contracts with me," Burke said sharply. His lip curled in a little gesture of disgust. "Do I understand you to say that you've come here to get specimens of the native life on this planet to be placed on exhibit in a *Zoo?*"

Colville grinned, showing beaverish teeth. "That's the ticket! We want the big ones, the ones that look like humans only they're ten-eleven feet high—"

Burke tapped his pipe sharply against the desk. "The

people of Dunhill V are *intelligent*, Colville. They aren't animals you can throw into a Zoo."

"Oh, you know what I mean," Colville wheedled. "Sure, maybe they can talk a little, and they can build a fire. But they're really savages, you know. Not even civilized. And we give them good care. We got specimens from all over the universe, everywhere. People travel for weeks to see our show."

"Your show will have to get along without the natives of Dunhill V."

"Dammit," Colville said thinly. "So Slater *did* get an exclusive after all!"

"Slater got tossed out on his ear," Burke said. "And you'll get the same, I'm not interested in handing over these people for boxing matches or for zoological exhibitions or for anything else. Now, will you get the hell out of here, or—"

"Don't get sore about it, Commander," Colville said. He smiled craftily. "There's a lot of natives here. Nobody would miss one or two—"

"*No!*"

"But I could make it awful nice to be cooperative. Mr. Annebale, he gave me a big expense account for this trip. And it wouldn't be hard for me to put you down as one of the expenses—"

Colville reached into his pocket and drew out a thick roll of crisp yellow Galactic Dollars. He riffled through the roll. They were fifties; there must have been five or six thousand dollars in the roll. Colville slapped the money down on the edge of Burke's desk and looked at him pleadingly.

"How about it, Commander? Mr. Annebale wants those big boys pretty hard. I'd hate to have to go back with an empty ship."

Burke said in a glacial voice, "Attempted bribery of a Galactic Officer is a pretty serious offence, Colville. But you're too much of a worm for me to let myself get involved in prosecuting you. Just get yourself off this planet as fast as you goddam can, and I'll forget the whole thing."

"Uh-uh," Colville said sullenly. "I'm entitled to stay overnight."

"Another space lawyer, huh? All right, take your overnight stay. But I'll give you the same warning I gave Slater: don't monkey around. Don't try to bribe any of my men and don't make trouble with the natives, or I'll give you good reason to regret it."

"You're the boy who'll have the regrets, Burke. You're passing up a chance for five thousand easy bucks, and you're gonna have Mr. Annebale mad at you for no good reason at all."

"I'll survive his anger, Colville."

"Maybe you won't."

"Let me worry about that. Just get out of my sight before I explode."

Colville scrambled. Burke realized he was quivering with anger. It took him nearly five minutes to cool himself off.

The universe, he thought, is full of rats and lice and parasites like Colville and Slater. As soon as a new planet is opened up, in rush the exploiters, looking for the quick buck, not caring how they get it.

Burke shook his head. He

had made two enemies today, powerful ones—Slater and Colville, and behind them Reynard and Annebale. Those men could make trouble for him. No doubt plenty of other good men in his position had succumbed to pressure from Reynard or Annebale in the past.

But I won't, Burke thought. He toyed with the idea of filing a formal complaint with the home office, and decided against it. There was no sense looking for real trouble. Reynard and Annebale were just too powerful to buck.

NIGHT fell on Dunhill V. The big yellow sun dropped behind the mountains that ringed the Terran settlement, and the planet's three moons appeared, two of them crescent, the third full and casting brightness across the face of the planet.

Caged in the control room of his spaceship, Slater paced uneasily up and down, back and forth, like an imprisoned tiger. As each minute of the night ticked away, so did his stay on Dunhill V, he knew.

When morning came he would have to leave. And Reynard would flay him alive if he came back without the giants.

Reynard had big plans for those giants, Slater thought gloomily. The boss had the promotion all drawn up already, a big play for the eleven-foot pugilists. The only thing missing was the main dish, the aliens themselves. And that was Slater's part of the job.

Slater hadn't expected Burke to be so tough about things. Sure, it was illegal to hoist a couple of aliens out of an officially unopened planet, but most commanders were willing to wink at that fact when you mentioned the powerful name of Harris Reynard—and if you left a few thousand Galactic bucks behind as a kind of tip.

Burke hadn't even given him the chance to bring up the subject of a possible bribe. And, Slater knew, Burke would never have accepted the bribe. The halfpint spaceman was one of those rare birds with an absolutely unbendable code of honor.

And it was just my luck to

run into him on this job, Slater thought.

His active mind ran up and down the situation from half a dozen angles. For one thing, Annebale's man Colville was here—and apparently had gotten the same cold shoulder he had. Well, that was good, but not good enough; Mr. Reynard wanted to stay one jump ahead of Annebale's freak-show, and grabbing off the aliens would be just the coup to do it.

But how could he get the big creatures? He couldn't pick the spaceship up and put it down somewhere else on the planet—if he blasted off now, without clearance, he would wake the whole camp up and have them on his tail right away, while if he waited till morning to leave they would monitor his ship until he had left the region of Dunhill V completely.

So going elsewhere was out. He had committed himself to this neck of the woods.

But there was an all-night guard posted at the entrance to the colony. He had a stunner-gun he could use to take

care of the guard, and finding his way to the nearby alien village wouldn't be much of a problem.

The real trouble was that it was risky, maneuvering around under that full moon, carting a cargo of giant aliens back and forth. If somebody came along and caught him, he would be in real hot water. Burke would be perfectly within his rights in executing him on the spot.

On the other hand, Slater thought, if he went back to Earth without the critters, Reynard would probably fire him—or worse.

He was caught either way. It was too risky to handle the job, and tough if he went back to report failure. He began to wish he had brought a confederate along with him. But that would have meant splitting the fee, and he hadn't anticipated this much trouble—

A new idea occurred. There was a perfect confederate next door. Of course, Reynard would be sore about it, but not half so sore as if he came back without anything at all. Yes, Slater thought! He smiled coldly. Cooperation

among thieves, that was the ticket!

He looked at his watch. It was past midnight, and the entire colony slept, all but the lone guard posted on night duty. Quietly, Slater opened the hatch of his small spaceship and darted across the spacefield to the place where Colville's ship stood.

SLATER bounded up the catwalk of Colville's vessel and rapped gently on the hatch. He didn't dare tap too loudly, for fear of arousing Burke's men—but, on the other hand, he wanted Colville to hear him.

He waited a long moment after tapping. Was Colville asleep? Damnation; this could foul up everything. Slater held his hand poised, ready to rap again in another minute if he had to.

A moment before his knuckles descended, Colville's voice came from within: "Who's there and what do you want?"

"It's Slater! Open up! I've got to talk to you, Colville!"

"About what?" came the

suspicious question from inside the hatch.

"Damn it, I'll wake the whole base up if I keep shouting from out here! Let me in and I'll explain the whole deal!"

There was silence for a moment; then, gears meshed with a tiny hum and the hatch slid open. Colville stood just inside the lip of the airlock, fully dressed, looking rattier than ever.

Slater forced his face not to reveal the contempt he felt for the sly little man. He and Colville had been rivals for years, crossing paths in the service of their respective employers. The idea of *cooperating* with Colville had never even struck him until tonight.

He stepped inside and sat down on a projecting rim. "I'm here to make a deal with you, Colville."

"I ain't interested in making any deals with you," Colville said thinly.

"Are you interested in going back from here with what you came for, or aren't you?"

"Of course I am. But it isn't any business of yours what—"

"Listen to me," Slater said.

"We're both up against a stone wall in this guy Burke. He turned me down flat and I'm pretty sure he turned you down the same way. Don't try to pretend he didn't. We both have to leave tomorrow and we're both going to have to leave without the big aliens."

"My affairs still don't matter to you."

"This isn't any time to start acting cautious!" Slater said. "I know what my boss is like, and I got a pretty good notion yours is the same way. They'll both take it out of our hides if we come back empty-handed. And singly we can't do a thing against this guy Burke. But if we team up, we can both get what we want."

Suspicion glittered in Colville's beady little eyes. "You trying to trick me, Slater?"

"Damn you, no! Will you trust me for once?"

"Trusting you ain't very safe."

"I could say the same for you," Slater retorted. "But we've got to work together on this thing. We can *both* get the aliens to take back."

"Annebale isn't gonna like it if Réynard has them too,"

Colville pointed out.

"He'll like it a lot less if he doesn't have them at all," Slater said. "Are you interested in listening to what I have to say?"

Colville paused. "Okay," he said after a moment. "Let's hear the pitch."

FIFTEEN minutes later Colville and Slater left the blasting area of the spacefield, allies for the first time after years of rivalry. Neither fully trusted the other—but, as Colville came to realize, unless they teamed up on this project they were both sunk.

Slater whispered, "I'll sneak up on the guard and cool him off with the stunner-gun. You wait back here with the rocket-sled and soon as I give the signal you come by and pick me up and we go to the village."

"Right."

Slater strolled forward, while Colville lurked in the shadows of the spacefield with the flat rocket-sled on which they planned to transport the giants. Up front, at the main gate, a guard paced up and

down slowly, on all-night duty. Slater gently massaged the butt of the stunner-gun in his pocket.

As he drew near, the guard turned round to face him. There was no friendliness on the man's face.

"Going for a walk?"

"Just taking the night air," Slater said. "I figured I'd get a stroll in before bedtime."

"Kind of late, isn't it?"

Slater chuckled. "I travelled two weeks to get to this planet, friend. Maybe I'm only going to be here one night, but I want to get a good look. That moonlight's pretty impressive."

"You ought to see it when all three moons are full. Happens twice a year, they tell me. The sky's full of light, and it's bright as day."

"Must be nice," Slater agreed. "Wish I could stick around to see it. But say, you must get awfully bored just wandering around all night on guard duty."

"It's only one night a month. I don't mind."

"You on all night?"

The guard shook his head.

"My relief man shows up in four hours. He stays on till morning."

"Bet you can't wait to hit the sack," Slater said. "Say, is there any law about drinking on duty? I got a little bottle of Procyon rum here that can really make your eyes glow."

"We're not supposed—"

"Oh, come on. Take a little nip," Slater urged. He reached into his pocket while the sentry was frowning doubtfully. But instead of a bottle of rum, Slater pulled out the stunner-gun. He squeezed the trigger-bulb before the guard knew what was going on.

There was no sound, no flare of light. But the guard caved in like a falling brick wall. Slater caught him deftly and eased him to the ground. With the jolt he had received, the sentry would be sound asleep for at least half a day.

Turning, Slater waved to Colville. The rocket-sled coughed a little as Colville started the engine, but Slater hoped the noise would not be enough to awaken the rest of the camp.

As the sled drew near, Slater hopped onto the seat next to

Colville and said, "Follow the road as far as it goes. We ought to reach the village pretty soon."

"You gave the sentry a good stunning?" Colville asked anxiously.

"Yeah. He's sound asleep. And his relief man doesn't show up for four hours. If we hurry, we've got it made."

THE bright glow of the full moon illuminated the bumpy dirt road, while the two crescent moons added lesser light from either side that did strange things to perspective and turned shadows into grotesquely distorted nightmare shapes.

Colville drove the sled steadily along, while Slater looked back constantly over his shoulder to see if they were being followed. No sound was coming from the camp. Apparently their departure had been successful; no one had awakened.

The road branched about a quarter of a mile from the Terran camp. As they approached the branch, Colville said, "Which way?"

"How in hell would I know? Turn left. The road's wider that way."

Colville turned left, and a few minutes later they found themselves drawing near the village. The moonlight displayed it clearly: there were a few dozen straw-covered huts of enormous size scattered in a wide semi-circle, looking like monstrous mushroomrooms. Behind the village was a broad pasture area.

Colville nudged Slater. "Good Lord, will you get a look at those things in the pasture!"

Slater looked. He moistened his lips tensely. "Big, ain't they?"

They certainly were. They were some kind of cattle, sleeping in the fields. But they were the size of elephants. Even lying down, huddled into themselves, their bulk was fantastic.

"I bet your man Annebale would like to get a couple of *those* babies into his zoo," Slater said. "What a bunch of monsters!"

"He's more interested in getting the humanoids," Col-

ville replied. "Big animals themselves ain't so much. It's big animals that look like human beings that get the crowds to come."

Slater nodded. "Okay. Stop the sled here and we'll go into this hut."

Colville pulled back on the brake and the rocket-sled came whistling to a halt. They climbed down. No sound came from the sleeping village. They were less than a dozen yards away from the hut nearest to the road. Slater gestured impatiently to Colville, who was hanging back nervously.

"Come on!" Slater urged.

"Suppose they have watchdogs?" Colville whispered nervously. "Watchdogs as big as bears, maybe."

Slater pointed to his stunner-gun. "We can take care of any sort of trouble. Hurry along."

Colville caught up with him and the two of them neared the entrance to the hut. There was no door, merely a gaping opening in the crudely-plastered wall of the dwelling. Moonlight trickled in.

Slater cautiously extended

his head in the doorway. What he saw nearly made him gasp with shock.

Four giants lay sleeping on rough heaps of straw. Up till that moment Slater had never seriously considered the dimensions of a human being—eleven feet tall. But now he saw them as they slept, naked, like savages.

He saw legs like tree trunks, an outstretched hand big enough to palm an Earthman's skull like a softball, a foot the size of an anvil, with toes like thick cigars. One of the four was a giantess who looked like the embodiment of all womanhood, with her watermelon-sized breasts and vast hips.

Even the size of the doorway was enough to cow an Earthman: it was at least fifteen feet high, while the roof of the hut was almost thirty feet above the ground. Everything was on a frighteningly huge scale in the hut.

"Well?" Colville whispered.

"You need a man and a woman, don't you?"

"Yes."

"And I need two young men. So we've got three out of our four right here."

Colville nodded. The couple would do just fine for Mr. Annebale's zoo. The other two seemed to be children—an adolescent boy, and a younger one who was a mere seven feet or so in length.

SLATER stepped inside. The hut had a peculiarly musky smell. Gripping the stunner-gun tightly, he pressed the trigger-bulb and held the beam steady on the largest of the giants, giving the native a triple dose because of his size.

"Easy there," Colville murmured. "An overdose could kill him."

"And an underdose could kill *us*, if he wakes up," Slater rejoined. He shifted the beam to the woman, then to the older of the two boys. Just as he finished, the younger one came awake. Eyes wide, the young giant rose unsteadily, muttering alien words.

"Slater! Over here! The young one's awake!"

Swinging round hastily, Slater applied the stunner-gun beam to the boy-giant. The brain-freezing beam took immediate effect. As the ponder-

ous native started to collapse, Slater and Colville ran to catch him, and eased him down to the bed of straw.

"Whew!" Colville exclaimed. "If we'd let him drop the thump would have awakened the whole village!"

"Don't waste time," Slater advised. "Let's find another hut and get our fourth catch."

Five natives slept in the adjoining hut—two mature ones and three more youthful specimens. Of the latter, two were girls just barely ripening into womanhood, the third a young man of about the same age as the one already asleep in the first hut.

Slater nodded approvingly. This would be just what Reynard would want: a pair of three-quarter-grown boys, big enough to be impressive (Slater estimated their height as between nine and ten feet) and still young enough to be taught the skills of boxing. Quickly, before any of them could awake, he stunned the entire lot.

He turned to see Colville staring in open hunger at the younger of the two girls. The

little rabbit man's face had a look of naked lust, even though it was obvious from her size—no more than six feet—and her small breasts that the alien girl was barely more than a child.

The expression on Colville's face was unutterably perverse, as though he were seriously considering flinging himself down on the body of the unconscious young giantess and making love to her.

Slater scowled disgustedly. "Stop making eyes at that kid, Colville. Let's get the haul hoisted aboard the sled."

That part of the job proved to be far more easily said than done. The sled was perhaps thirty feet away. But the two giant boys weighed better than three hundred pounds apiece, the woman perhaps four hundred, and the man, an eleven-footer, weighed at least five hundred pounds.

It took nearly half an hour for Slater and Colville to lug the four immense bodies out of the huts and onto the sled, and by the end of that time both were nearly at the point of collapse.

At last it was done,

though—all four stowed on the sled and strapped down. Slater took a last look around the village. Despite everything, no one had awakened.

Colville got behind the wheel of the rocket-sled. For an instant Slater was tempted, as he stared at Slater's back, to stun the smaller man and leave him here. But Slater decided against it. It would be pleasant to leave Annebale's man behind holding the bag, but there was no getting away from the fact that he needed Colville to help him load the ship.

They drove back to the Terran camp in silence. Only about an hour had elapsed since their departure. The sentry still slumbered where Slater's stunner-beam had carried him.

Colville and Slater took turns loading their ships, to avoid any possibility of trickery. First Colville lowered his cargo hoist and he and Slater dragged the giant man aboard and strapped him down in the caged area inside. Then, one of Slater's boxers was taken aboard the other ship. The loading job took the better

part of an hour. Finally it was done, though, with the giant couple safely imprisoned on Colville's ship and the two boys similarly caged on Slater's. When the effects of the stunner-beam wore off, they would not be in any danger from the captive aliens.

Colville and Slater met for the last time in the area between their ships. Colville grinned. "I guess I owe you some thanks, Slater. I couldn't have managed without you."

"Skip the sentiment. I wouldn't have teamed up with you if I thought there was any way of getting the aliens on board my ship."

Slater fingered the stunner-gun in his pocket. One quick blast, and Colville would lie here unconscious, to be found by Burke in the morning, while he got away with his cargo—

But Colville said, "Okay, I'll skip the sentiment. Suppose we just back toward our ships and get aboard. That way you can't try anything fancy on me."

"You don't trust me?"

"I never have," Colville said evenly.

Slater shrugged. It had been a good idea, anyway. Well, Reynard would have to be satisfied with having half of Earth's supply of giants, that was all. He backed toward his ship, keeping a wary eye on Colville; ascending the catwalk, he dogged shut the hatch and prepared the ship for blast-off.

Space regulations provided that he was supposed to obtain blastoff permission before leaving. But there was no one awake to give it to him, and, in any event, he had no interest in tipping his hand to Burke. He jammed down on the blastoff lever.

His ship rose on a pillar of flame. An instant later, so did Colville's.

THE double thunder of the departing ships penetrated the dreams of the slumbering Commander Burke. He rolled over on his cot, thinking that the giants must be bowling. Then he came fully awake. That sound could only have been the blasting-off of spaceships.

Now? In the middle of the

night? Without official clearance?

Burke rushed to the window and stared out. He saw twin flares of light high above the spacefield, dwindling rapidly, vanishing completely.

Colville and Slater were gone. Why? Burke's throat went dry. What had made them suddenly decide to leave, together, at this odd hour?

He dressed hurriedly. The camp was coming awake; lights were on all over the place, and men were rushing out into the compound, asking each other questions no one could answer.

"Quiet!" Burke snapped, silencing the hubbub. He picked out a man. "Lieutenant Herbert, what happened just now?"

"The—the spaceships," Herbert stammered. "Those two little ships from Earth. They both just blasted off."

"Did anybody see Colville and Slater after taps tonight?"

No one answered. Burke scowled. The first streaks of dawn were beginning to appear behind the distant mountains. "Who was tonight's sentry?"

Captain McGuire, who made up the sentry-go rotation, said, "Corporal Norris."

"Find me Norris," Burke ordered.

It took a few moments for the command to be fulfilled. Two men finally discovered the unhappy sentry lying sprawled unconscious in the tall grass near the gate of the compound, his eyes wide and glassy.

Grim-faced, Burke and Dr. Wylie, the camp's medic, inspected the sleeping sentry.

"What do you think it is, Doctor?"

Wylie shrugged. "There's only one thing it could possibly be. See the pattern of broken capillaries in the whites of his eyes? This man was rayed down with a stunner-gun, Commander."

Burke looked up slowly. He was completely wide awake now. But he still did not understand why Colville and Slater had chosen the middle of the night in which to make their unannounced departure. And why stun the sentry? Something peculiar had happened here—but—what was it? What had Colville and

Slater done? He had to know.

As the Commander stood indecisively over the sleeping form of the sentry, one of the younger noncoms came running up breathlessly.

"Sir—sir—"

"What is it, Mr. Holman?"

"I was just down the road a little way—looking to see if there was anything suspicious down there—and—and—" Holman gasped for breath. "The natives, sir. The giants."

"What about them?" Burke demanded irritably. "Spit it out, boy!"

"I'm trying to tell you, sir. They're coming up the road. The whole bunch of them marching here. And they look angry, sir. They look like they're spoiling for a fight!"

THE natives reached the camp a few minutes later. They were an impressive, even terrifying sight. Never before had more than a handful come to the camp at any one time. Now there were more than fifty, clustering in thick knots and buzzing angrily to each other in their harsh, guttural

language. Many of them had not bothered to dress at all, while a few wore only the loin-cloths that were their daily clothes.

In the front of the group was the mountainous alien Burke had come to recognize as chief of the loosely-organized tribe. He was about twelve feet high and weighed close to seven hundred fifty pounds, but right now his dimensions seemed twice that.

Burke looked around. His men were pale and tense. The bulky natives dwarfed the entire compound, since their heads were nearly as high as the roofs of the one-story huts. The big creatures milled around, grunting in what looked quite clearly like rage. It was the first time Burke had seen them in any other emotional state than their normal placidity, and it was alarming to watch them grow steadily more angry.

Burke stepped forward to face the enraged alien chief, taking with him the expedition's head linguistics expert, Bryson. Bryson had studied the alien language and knew it

as well as any of the Earthmen in the camp.

The Commander felt like an absurd pygmy before the aliens. He was accustomed to looking up to other people, but not usually this far up. On Dunhill V, life had simply developed on a different scale from the rest of the galaxy.

The natives were eleven-footers; the trees towered hundreds of feet into the air; the cattle were the size of bull elephants. And now, for the first time, these monstrous people seemed to be angry—angry enough to march into the Ter-ran camp several hours before dawn.

The alien chief rumbled out a booming complaint, far above their heads. Commander Burke said to the linguist, "Find out what he's yelling about."

Bryson said something to the alien, who became silent a moment, then poured out a flood of accusations and protests. In the middle of the outburst, Bryson turned to the Commander and said, "It seems four of his people are missing, and some others are asleep and won't wake up. Noises were

heard in the village and when the aliens investigated they found the empty beds. They think *we* kidnapped the missing ones."

"Tell them we're not responsible," Burke said. "Tell them that we're going to do everything in our power to help find the missing ones."

Bryson craned his neck and shouted a few sentences to the enraged alien chief. The reply did not seem to satisfy the giant. He stamped his foot, snarled, turned in a complete circle to signify his displeasure.

"What did he say?" Burke demanded.

The linguist's shoulders slumped. "He thinks we took the missing people to make experiments on, the way we've taken other local life-forms. Should I tell him about Colville and Slater?"

"No. That won't do any good. Just tell him again that we didn't kidnap his people, and we'll help all we can to locate them."

Bryson passed the message along. But the alien chief did not seem to be interested in listening. He grunted out a

lengthy reply, spun on his heel, and strode away with ground-shaking tread. Barking commands at his people, he shepherded the entire lot of giants out of the compound and onto the road leading back to their village.

"What was all that about?" Burke asked.

"It was an ultimatum. Either we restore the missing tribespeople by sunrise tomorrow, or he and his people will destroy our camp."

Burke had a sudden vivid mental picture of fifty or sixty massive aliens smashing and crashing their way through the buildings of the compound like bulls in a china shop. He closed his eyes for a moment, tightening his jaws.

"You think it was Colville and Slater, sir?" the linguist asked.

"Of course. Those two reptiles must have buddied up and gone to the native village together. We'll have to send out a general wide-band alarm to the Space Police—maybe they can be caught and brought back in time to head off the native ultimatum."

"If not—?"

Burke shrugged heavily. "I'd prefer not to think about the alternative possibilities, Major."

He turned and headed rapidly across the compound toward the radio shack.

THE alarm went out on ultraband to all Space Police ships that might be within a fifty light-year radius of Dunhill V. Burke's message described the two ships in detail, explained the nature of the crime, and stressed the importance of detecting the fleeing Colville and Slater and bringing the kidnapped alien giants back to Dunhill V.

By the time Burke had finished dictating the message, the sun was beginning to rise. He remained in the radio shack, watching Lieutenant Hastings code the message and feed it into the transmitters.

"How long should I send it, sir?" Hastings asked.

"Put it on a looped tape and send it out indefinitely," Burke replied. "But let one of your assistants take care of that job. I want you to set up

a subradio contact for me with the home office on Earth."

"Yes, sir."

It took twenty minutes to make contact across the light-years. There was no visual, of course; the audio signal between Dunhill V and Earth was bent by hyperspace and travelled instantly between the two planets, while conventional radio transmission would have taken years in each direction.

Burke spoke to Brigadier General Cauldwell of the Terran Extraterrestrial Development Corps. It was most unusual for an expedition to make a direct report back to Earth, and Cauldwell said so.

"These are unusual circumstances, General Cauldwell," Burke explained. "We had a couple of visitors from Earth last night."

"Visitors? What kind of visitors?"

"One man who was recruiting for Harris Reynard's boxing exhibitions, and another trying to collect specimens for W. H. Annebale's interstellar zoo. They got here in a neck-and-neck race and asked my permission to let them have a

few of the aliens to take back. I refused it, of course."

"Dunhill V—that's the planet with the giants, isn't it?" Cauldwell asked.

"Yes, sir. After I refused permission, they both claimed the right of Overnight Stay on me. There wasn't anything I could do about that. And during the night, while everybody was asleep, they stunner-gunned my sentry, sneaked out of camp and into the alien village, and kidnapped four of the aliens. They blasted off without giving notice for clearance."

"Have you notified the Space Police?"

"Of course, sir," Burke said. "But just in case these two slip through the interception net, I think they ought to be nabbed when they reach Earth. It's a flat violation of the law to kidnap intelligent alien beings like that, of course."

"You needn't point that out to me," General Cauldwell said stiffly. "How are the natives reacting?"

"They're hopping mad. They threaten to destroy the camp if we don't get the missing na-

tives back here by sunrise tomorrow."

"What are your plans in case they attack?"

Burke said, "Evacuation, sir. I can't risk the lives of a hundred fifty men, and I don't want to have to kill aliens. We'll pull out if we're faced with any real danger."

"All right, Burke. Report to me again in twelve hours and let me know how the situation stands."

The contact broke. Burke walked scowling out of the radio shack. He had a good idea of what was going on inside Brigadier General Cauldwell's mind.

Cauldwell was probably uncomfortable about the prospect of arresting anybody belonging to either Reynard or Annebale. Those two had money and they had influence. They could make or break anybody in the entire Corps, just by pulling a few high-level strings. Assuming Colville and Slater reached Earth, Cauldwell would think twice about arresting them, law or no law.

Leaving the radio shack, Burke called together his senior

officers and ordered them to begin evacuation procedure. All scientific research was to be halted and everything to be packed and placed aboard the ships. The ships were to be made ready for immediate blastoff on a moment's notice.

It was the only thing to do. Although the colony was well enough armed to fight off an alien attack, it was suicidally foolish to do so. Bloodshed would only lead to further bloodshed. A hundred fifty Earthmen could not fight off an entire planet of giant humanoids, primitive though they were.

The sensible thing to do was to retreat without striking a defensive blow. Then, perhaps, later it would be possible to renew friendly relations with the giants. Once blood was shed, Earth would have to forget all about this planet as a possible colony, for enmity would have sprung up as a result of battle.

THE first reports from the Space Police ships began coming in toward noon. A dozen ships had joined the search for Colville and Slater. They

had fanned out over a wide area of space and were scanning the region with mass detectors. As yet, there was no sign of the ships, but they could not be far from Dunhill V, since less than half a day had passed since their departure.

The next report, two hours later, was equally negative. "The search is continuing," was all the Police message had to say.

Burke paced the colony grounds, supervising the evacuation procedure. Men worked grimly against the clock, getting everything worth preserving aboard the ship. There wasn't much hope of catching Colville and Slater before the deadline expired at sunrise the next day, and there was no hope at all of getting the missing aliens restored to their village in time. Not even if the ships were intercepted at this very moment could the aliens be returned before the next dawn.

And then, around mid-afternoon, the drumming began.

Linguist Bryson was the first to notice it. Burke was too

busy with the evacuation work. But the linguist caught his attention and said, "Commander, do you hear the drums beating?"

"Drums? What are you talking about, Bryson?"

"Listen!"

Burke listened. And he heard. A dull, steady *broommm - b r o o o m m m - brooommm* sound, repeated over and over, reverberating from the hills. He felt a sudden constricting twinge of fear pass across his heart.

"Those are the big drums, aren't they?"

Bryson nodded. "The ones they use when sending messages from tribe to tribe."

Burke had seen the big drums in the village. They were made of some kind of stretched animal-hide, and the drumskins were twelve or thirteen feet across. The natives had said the drums were used only in time of emergency, to send signals between villages.

The drums were being used now.

Burke cursed Colville and Slater and their unscrupulous employers for the sixtieth time

in the past two hours. The drums were beating. The peaceful giants were infuriated. The work of six months was undone overnight by two quick-footed sharpies.

Turning away from Bryson, Burke called out an order to his adjutant, Major Leroy. "Get one of the helicopters unpacked and send up a man to scout the area," Burke ordered. "We'd better find out just what the aliens are up to."

THE two helicopters had already been disassembled and stored aboard ship. It took better than an hour to get one of them in working order again. One of the noncoms was sent aloft to have a look around.

The drumbeats increased in intensity during the afternoon. As the first shadows of night began to descend, the Space Police called again: still no luck in chasing the kidnappers, but a couple of shadows had been detected on the cosmic radar screen, and the Police ships were investigating. They promised to report back as soon as anything concrete developed.

The helicopter scout re-

turned to the base just after sunset.

"Well?" Burke demanded. "What did you see?"

"Cattle, sir. All the tribes are driving their cattle together into one big field about twenty miles from here. Thousands of cattle milling around."

"How about the tribe adjoining the base? Did they drive their cattle out too?"

The scout nodded. "The pastures are empty. Every beast for miles around is either in that one field or else on its way."

Burke frowned. What kind of ceremony was this, he wondered? It didn't sound good, whatever it meant. He ordered the scout to join his group.

Night fell. In ten hours, it would be sunrise; the alien ultimatum would expire. And then—*what?*

They ate an uneasy meal in camp that night. The drumming continued steadily, rising in intensity; they could pick out definite patterns of statement and answer, though of course they had no idea of what the messages meant.

When it came time for taps,

Burke ordered a ten-man guard to surround the camp all night, plus men to man the radio shack in case of a message from the Space Police. He himself went to his own quarters. It was a long time before he could fall asleep.

THERE was someone shaking him. Burke sat up groggily and blinked.

"Huh? Who is it?"

"Fedderman, sir. I've got a report from the Space Police that just came in. They've caught Colville and they're chasing Slater—they expect to nab him too within a couple of hours!"

Burke was totally awake immediately. "Thank God! What time is it?"

"Just before dawn, sir."

"Just—before—dawn. So we might make it, after all. Go wake Major Bryson. And get a jeep ready for me. Hurry!"

Fedderman raced out of the room. Burke dressed rapidly. Maybe there was still a chance, then! With Colville caught, Slater trapped in the net—

The drums were still beating.

"I hear they caught them,

sir," Bryson said as the jeep started.

"You hear correctly. Now, if we can only make the aliens believe it—"

They reached the native village within minutes. Burke leaped down from the jeep, Bryson following him. They rushed into the village, heading for the chief's hut.

"Why—the place is empty!" Bryson exclaimed.

They wandered around the deserted village. Not an alien was to be found. Burke had a coppery taste in his mouth; he sensed disaster.

The drums still rumbled in the distance. But there was the village drum, in the square nearby. So they were the drums of other villages, then.

Bryson and Burke returned to the camp. The drumming was tremendously loud now, and no pattern could be distinguished; it was just one continuous sound of thunder now.

The base was awake. Burke ordered a man to take the helicopter up again and have a look around. "The village is empty," he said. "See if you

can find out where the aliens are."

The helicopter rose into the air. Puzzled by the disappearance of the aliens, Burke sat frowning in front of his office. The colony was a dismal sight, almost totally dismantled. At a moment's notice, the evacuation could be carried out.

Half an hour later, the scout returned—landing the helicopter so clumsily that it nearly crashed. The scout clambered out. His face was white as he came rushing over to Commander Burke.

"We've got to clear out, sir!" he chattered hysterically. "The aliens—the cattle—we've got to evacuate—"

"Whoa!" Burke cried. "Slow down and tell me about it one word at a time."

The scout nodded and took a deep breath. "I—flew about twenty miles, sir. All of the aliens are massed with their cattle—one gigantic herd, thousands of animals. And the aliens are driving them this way. It's a deliberate stampede!"

"Good God!" Burke cried. A stampede of Earthsize cattle

would be serious enough. But these were cattle the size of elephants!

Whistling for attention, the Commander gave the general evacuation order. Every man to his ship, immediate blastoff. Any equipment that had not been packed would have to be left behind. There was no time to waste now.

Within minutes, the ships were loaded. Only Burke and his adjutant, Major Leroy, remained in the deserted compound. The drumming reached a fierce crescendo now—but it was no longer the sound of drums, Burke knew, but of pounding hooves.

"All right, Major," Burke said in a tight voice. "Get aboard the flagship and give the blastoff order. You're in charge."

Leroy looked puzzled. "Sir, I don't understand—"

"Didn't you hear me? Get aboard the ship, Major. That's an order."

"But what about you?"

"I'm staying here."

"What, sir? But the stampede—"

"Did you hear me? *Get aboard the ship.*"

Leroy took a hesitant step toward Burke, who immediately drew his ornamental pearl-handled gun. "Don't disobey an order, Major. Get going. I'll shoot you down if you attempt to interfere."

The Major opened his mouth, started to say something, let his mouth close. He shook his head slowly. Then, since there was nothing else he could do, he turned and ran toward his ship.

Alone now in the compound, Commander Burke smiled sadly at the empty huts, the deserted laboratory, at the alien sky of Dunhill V. The drumming grew even louder.

He knew that he had to stay here and face the onslaught. It was, in a way, his fault for not having watched Colville and Slater closely enough. Besides, he knew, if he returned to Earth the powerful influence of Reynard and Annebale would smash his career as his reward for having thwarted them. And, besides, he felt a certain obligation that dated back to me-

dieval times: this was his post, and he would not abandon it.

Flame blazed on the space-field as the six ships of his expedition rose from the ground and vaulted skyward. Probably the men would not find out until later that their Commander had been left behind.

Burke shrugged. It was too bad, all too bad—but, he thought, soon he would no longer have to worry about it. The herd would be here, the monstrous herd, driven by their vengeful and gigantic masters. The great creatures would sweep over the empty camp, destroying everything.

Commander Burke squared his shoulders. *Maybe I'm the only hero left in the whole god-dam universe*, he thought. *The only man with enough backbone to keep from selling out to the slimy rats like Reynard. Well, at least I'll die like a man should.*

He took a deep breath. He waited for the oncoming giants, for the onslaught of the whirling hooves.

THE END

WORLD OF CREEPING TERROR

by J. W. ROSE

Flora was supposed to be a safe and harmless planet. Why then was the young Earthman attacked by so many vicious and dangerous creatures in so short a time?

"I'M worried," said the Captain to his Mate. "The shades of night are falling fast, and Boney is two hours overdue."

The nickname, alas, was due to no fancied resemblance to one Napoleon Bonaparte, but rather to the meagerness of the meat that covered the junior crew member's lanky arms and legs.

The Mate sneered: "He probably thinks his scoutmaster training on Mars equips him for solo expeditions on Flora."

The Captain frowned. "He could get in trouble. I hope he has a full supply of xanthine tablets with him."

At that precise moment, Boney *was* in trouble.

Hours of trudging through the flower-jungles had convinced him that the planet Flora was aptly named: a florist's delight, but hardly stimulating to a novice explorer. He was so bored by the endless expanses of lush vegetation and the ever-present heavy perfume—rather like the dizzying scents that some girls wore, he thought—that he completely forgot to take his xanthine tablet every hour on the hour. As a matter of fact, he wondered why the Skipper had insisted on his taking along the repellent drug at all. So far he had seen no animal life.



He stood now on the bank of a wide stream, looking across at more of the same enormous, drowsy flowers on the far side, and debating whether to turn right or left or return to the ship, when he heard the rustling a few yards behind him. It was more like the rustling of an expanse of dead leaves stirred by a light breeze.

He drew his electronic pistol from its holster and took a few cautious steps in the general direction of the sound, in full confidence that the weapon could kill or at least stun any beast this side of a mastodon. With his free hand he reached out and thrust aside a bower of large red blossoms. There was nothing in sight. Then he looked down at the ground, and his blood turned to ice water.

The ground was swarming, as far as the eye could see, with great black driver ants, fully an inch in length. He jumped back as one of the insects, ferocious mandibles spread wide, crawled up on his boot, and stamped it loose, crushing it under his heel. He turned the blaster on full force and swept it over a wide area within its range. After fifteen

seconds he turned it off. A hundred square yards of flowers and shrubs had been reduced to powdery ashes, and thousands of the driver ants gone up in puffs of smoke and steam. But then, like a wave breaking over a reef, the slaughtered hosts were replaced by a seemingly endless wave of crawling blackness.

Boney felt his skin crawl as though he were already being explored by the first vanguard of savage ants. He made a quick decision and ran to his right along the edge of the stream. A few yards later he came to a dead halt, the hairs rising on the back of his neck. The horde had swept to the edge of the water.

He turned back and ran in the opposite direction, and turned pale when he found that escape was also blocked in that direction. There was no question whatever of trying to make a dash through the rustling carpet of insects, which now blackened the ground and even the shrubs as far as he could see.

He tried one more blast with the electronic weapon, not really expecting too much. He was

right. The ants crisped and crackled and cindered by the millions, but when the blue flame shut off, wave after wave seemed to well up from the ground itself. He thrust the pistol back into its holster.

The seething milling carpet of black insects now formed a crescent around him, and closed in slowly. He knew that when they got his scent, the gap would close with a rush, and he would go down screaming, a writhing, shapeless mass covered with layers of coldly efficient little machines, each carrying off as much flesh as it could tear away from his bones.

He turned and faced the stream. His wind had never been too good, but he could swim in fashion, and the current did not seem too rapid. He pulled off the heavy boots with regret, and tossed them out into the water as crude buoys to test the rapidity of the stream. He felt the blood drain from his face.

The seemingly innocent stream erupted into splashing, turbulent violence as his boots were torn apart by a swarm of silvery fish a foot long, their

slim bodies dominated by an over-sized mouth with a full complement of razor-sharp teeth.

Tales of the piranhas and other carnivorous fish of earth's tropical rivers thronged through his mind. He wondered despairingly why previous explorers of this apparently mild and harmless planet had made no reports of either driver ants or the finny ferocity that was now in the process of reducing his leather boots to shreds.

Boney was by nature and conviction opposed to the idea of suicide, but he knew grimly that he was not going to let himself make a meal for either the millions of bellies of the remorseless ants, or the fewer but no less voracious fish. He drew the blaster from the holster and turned the flared muzzle toward his own head. His finger tightened briefly, then quickly relaxed again, and he cursed himself for a fool.

The xanthine tablets! Of course! He plunged the pistol back into the holster and reached into an inner pocket with trembling fingers and drew out a small plastic tube.

He tapped out one large white tablet and popped it under his tongue, and felt it dissolve rapidly and absorb into his blood stream. It would, they had told him, cause his body to emit an odor that would repel hungry, hostile creatures, although he himself would not detect it.

While he waited for the drug to dissolve in his mouth, he saw several giant scouts at the nearest edge of the living, undulating carpet wave their antennae in his direction, then head straight for him, followed by obedient streams of warrior ants. Evidently the drug did not repel insects...

Boney muttered a quick prayer and waded out into the warm water of the stream, not a second too soon. The black wave swept up to the very edge, the ferocious hordes tumbling over each other layer upon layer in a tangled wall of milling legs, bodies, feelers and snapping pincers. From the closest rank now, wriggling bodies began to detach themselves and fall into the water, where they floated toward him in hungry persistence.

He took a deep breath and launched himself into the mid-

dle of the stream, lashing the water into foam with his flailing arms and legs. He beat his way slowly and awkwardly toward the far bank, expecting at any moment to feel needle-sharp teeth tear at his flesh from the muddy waters beneath him.

But nothing happened. Flora's piranhas had disappeared as abruptly as they had come. He reached the other side and pulled himself up on the bank. When he was completely out of the water, he threw himself down on his back and drew in great, hungry gasps of air, and let his limbs grow limp as rags.

HE woke with a start. Flora's sun was low in the planet's west, and the air was turning a misty blue peculiar to twilight there. The complete relaxation, combined with the heady odor of the universal flowers, had caused him to fall asleep.

He bit his lower lip, wondering how to get back to the spaceship before nightfall. He strained his eyes toward the opposite bank, but in the dim-

ming light could not be sure whether the black shadows on the ground were merely ashes, or a rearguard of the ant army, waiting patiently for his return.

He shuddered. He dared not go back that way. He made a quick mental calculation and decided to strike out to the north, where the stream seemed to curve gradually away from him and back in the general direction of the ship.

He set out with hurrying footsteps, as much afraid of the Captain's tongue as of alien fangs lurking in the foliage. They would be just about getting ready to send out a rescue party, foregoing evening chow to find him.

He plodded on in his stockinged feet, bitterly wishing he could have been able to swim across the stream with his boots on. The ground was not hard or stony, but was persistently wet and slushy, as if the firm, dry soil at the start of his journey was giving way to mud or wet sand. A few hundred feet further along the course of the river, and he realized that the ground was much too soft.

Indeed, he saw with a start,

that his feet were sinking ankle-deep into the soft stuff. He paused and peered about blindly through the thickening blue haze that preceded the pitch-black of the coming night. Flora had no moon, and the stars were spread thinly in this segment of the galaxy.

He decided to go a little farther, and then to turn back if the ground did not get firmer. He lifted his right foot to take the first step, pulling it out violently with a sucking *plop*, and set it down again.

He failed completely to extricate the other foot, and his stomach dropped sickeningly when he realized that he had sunk into the mire up to a point midway between ankle and knee. He braced himself and pulled, and his right leg sank up to the knee in muck of the consistency of soft butter.

He struggled and wallowed in vain, and his violent contortions only pushed him deeper, and he felt the cold, damp mud press up suddenly against his groin. Quicksand! He put his face in his hands and groaned. He raised his head again, cupped his hands to his mouth and shouted again and again.

But his cries died away in the suffocating silence, and only silence answered him.

He gritted his teeth and reached out through the now-total darkness, slicing the air with his arms as he searched for a hand-hold. The chill muck reached his navel. He threw his arms upward and clawed at the indifferent sky. He brushed something with the back of his hand, and flailed about wildly, trying to find it again.

There it was! A thick vine or liana of some kind, dangling within reach, but just barely, teasing his grazing fingertips with a lazy swinging motion that he could not see in the velvety blackness. It was now or never; another inch or two into the sucking grip of the slime and it would be forever beyond his reach.

He strained upward as if he would stretch his taut body like rubber, and then his fingertips found the dangling rope of salvation and wrapped themselves around it with a desperation that squeezed blood beneath his nails. He held on and began to pull himself up slowly against the combined forces of gravity and suction, feeling his tendons

begin to tear and his joints creak.

The muscles in his arms and shoulders bulged and twisted into agonizing knots. A red mist began to form behind his eyes, and his ears roared with blood. The breath whistled through his nostrils and his thigh and stomach muscles spasmed as he fought to wrench them from the quicksand.

A long moment of torture on the rack of his own effort, suspended between heaven and hell, and then he felt the clammy vise loosen its grip around his hips. Another pain-lanced contortion of his thin body, and his legs were free, dangling blessedly free in the air.

The sudden release gave new strength to his arms, and he pulled himself up hand over hand, exulting in the newfound lightness of his body, until his bleeding fingertips met the reassuring firmness of a stout tree-limb.

He heaved himself upward with a last convulsion of effort and straddled the limb and leaned back weakly against the friendly solidity of the tree-trunk and breathed with deep,

shuddering gasps until the muscles of his chest and ribs ached. After a while, it might have been minutes or hours, he wearily removed his sweat-soaked shirt and used it to secure his thighs to the limb he straddled, tying the arms of the shirt into a knot beneath the branch.

He removed his belt and tried to pass it around the tree, but the bole was too thick. He explored the air just over his head with leaden arms, and found another smaller branch jutting over his left shoulder. He passed the belt under his arm pits and over the second branch and tightened the buckle, giving his upper body support. Thus reinforced, his eyes closed in sudden and utter relaxation. He slept.

The searching party returned to the ship later that night, led by the sour-faced Mate.

"No sign of Junior," he snarled. "Can we eat now?"

The Captain waved his permission and turned to the ship's medic with furrowed brow.

"Could anything happen to the lad?"

The physician pursed his

lips. "I hardly think so. Every crew member was selected for emotional stability. He also has the indubitable advantage of youth. As for the possibility of physical dangers, that's your province, not mine."

"Well," the Captain sighed with a measure of relief, "then he's all right. Flora has been proved to be absolutely safe."

BONEY awoke to the sound of birds and the light of a pearly grey dawn filtering through his eyelids. He opened his eyes, rubbing gritty grains from each corner, and looked up at an innocent blue sky. He yawned and stretched, then groaned at the protesting ache of weary muscles. He reached down to his waist to undo the belt that had held him upright through the night.

His waist? He vaguely remembered having looped the belt under his arm pits the night before, and the thought occurred to him at the same time that his fumbling hands encountered the thick, cold, dry band around his waist—a band as thick as the calf of his leg. He took a cautious breath and looked down.

His scouting experience on earth had given him some experience with snakes, but not with anything this big. His heart stopped for a long moment, then tried to bound out through his chest. He turned his head slowly to avoid waking the reptile, his eyes following the scaly curves from the segment that snuggled around his middle, along the loop that wrapped itself once around the limb, and then down to the flat, ugly head dangling some ten feet below.

He realized now that this was the 'vine' he had used to pull himself out of the bog, but somehow could not feel very grateful. With infinite slowness and caution, he reached up and undid the belt that supported him from the upper limb, then untied the shirt-sleeves that fastened his legs to the branch he was straddling, and dropped them to the ground.

He braced his hands against the lower branch, pulled in his stomach until it almost pressed against his backbone, and tried to ease himself out of the deadly gray coils. No use. The thick tube of muscle and sinew was

coiled too snugly for him to get his hips through. Then he felt the strength drain from his body as he realized that his efforts had only served to arouse the drowsing anaconda.

A ripple of vast, indolent strength ran through the twenty foot length of reptile, and the spade-shaped head began to rise in a lazy, deadly arc. Boney pressed himself back against the bole of the tree, breathing with short, shallow breaths, and holding himself motionless in the hope that the giant snake would ignore him.

But it was both curious and hungry, and in a few seconds the snub-nosed head was on a level with his, and the cold, expressionless eyes stared into his, a mere foot away.

He felt the tickle in his nostrils and tried valiantly to suppress the sneeze. He succeeded only to the extent of emitting a grunting cough, and that was enough. He felt the coil around his waist tighten a little. He closed his eyes and muttered a prayer, then extracted the electronic pistol from its holster. Better to perish in a mutual holocaust of snake and man than to undergo agonizing

death. He pointed the muzzle at the flat head and pulled the trigger.

Nothing happened. He realized that he must have exhausted the temporary charge on the ant hordes the day before. He threw the empty weapon at the weaving, bobbing head, but missed. He exhaled, and the coil snuggled tighter. He knew that would happen. Contrary to popular belief, such snakes did not crush their victims to death. They waited for each exhalation, and as the belly and chest of the prey relaxed a little, coiled still tighter, until the helpless quarry died of slow suffocation.

He felt his eyes bulge in their sockets and the veins begin to stand out on his forehead. He attempted to outwit his relentless captor by breathing in short, quick gasps, but it instantly sensed every movement of his muscles and responded with a further tightening of the vise of muscle and sinew. His ears began to ring and a mist formed before his bulging eyes, when he cursed himself for a fool and thought suddenly of the xanthine tablets. But would it work on reptiles?

He reached with one arm into his trousers pocket and pulled out the plastic vial with fingers that had grown suddenly numb and cold. He fumbled and dropped the vial, but not before he had managed to palm one of the white tablets. He inserted it into his mouth beneath his tongue as instructed, and felt it dissolve quickly. Then he felt the mighty band draw tighter, with a sudden, impatient spasm of hunger in the huge gray snake, and his head dropped forward as blackness swept over him.

WHEN he came to, there was no sign of the reptile. The repellent drug had evidently worked. He raised himself shakily to his feet, then descended painfully to the ground from branch to branch. When he reached bottom, he staggered on again in the generally northern direction he had chosen the day before, following the curve of the river.

In his blind fatigue and hysterical haste to get back to the ship, he forgot everything else, and lurched onward, shoeless, shirtless, beltless, and minus his weapon and the rest of the

protective tablets, leaving them where they had fallen and scattered on the ground at the base of the tree.

The planet's big, blue sun rose higher in the sky, and its ultra-violet-rich rays stabbed through the tree-tops with invisible lances of fire, slowly baking and blistering his naked torso. His legs were turning to lead, growing heavier with each step, and his feet had turned to numbed stumps. As the morning grew warmer, the ever-present enormous flowers began to pour their chloroform-heavy perfume into the air, and his head swam as if he had been drugged. He cupped his hands to his dry lips and tried to *hal-loo!* but only a croak came from his dry throat.

Ignoring the warning of possible polluted water, he dropped to his belly on the bank of the river and plunged his cupped hands into the stream and poured turgid gulps of water down his parched gullet. When his thirst was slaked, he slopped the cool water over his face and head and on his burning shoulders and back.

He pressed his feverish body gratefully against the cool,

damp soil of the river's edge, feeling his blood pump renewed strength through his limbs and the bone-racking fatigue recede in ever-diminishing waves. Perhaps half an hour passed before he felt his second wind, and raised himself slowly on his hands and knees. He leaped suddenly to his feet, the hairs standing up on the nape of his neck as he heard a slow, ominous growl. He turned around slowly.

It was the size of a lion, and black and evil, and looked very hungry and determined.

THE Captain looked at his wrist watch and bit his lower lip. "Getting near noon," he muttered anxiously, "and still no sign of Boney." He turned on the medic.

"Are you certain nothing could have happened to him?"

The ship's physician sighed patiently, but he did have a tiny wrinkle between his brows. "No, Captain, I don't think so. The boy has a strong heart and is completely without a psychotic streak. And if he has been taking his xanthine tablets regularly, he's in no trouble."

"Still," said the Captain, wringing his hands, "I feel guilty and responsible about the whole thing. I almost wish that one of the other crew members had let it leak out to the lad."

The physician shrugged. "You wanted a control-subject," he replied slowly. "You got one."

BONEY stood limply with his back to the river, wondering dully whether he had time to dive in and swim out of reach of this latest menacing carnivore; and, if he did, whether being picked apart by the piranhas was really preferable to perishing with long fangs in his throat and knife-edged claws ripping into his belly. In any case, he knew that this was *it*. He had no weapon. He didn't have any more repellent tablets with him. There was nothing to do but stand his ground and meet his doom like a man.

The black beast flicked its tail back and forth and raised its snout into the air to sniff its prey before launching into the attack. It growled again, and Boney felt the low-pitched vi-

bration in his backbone. He swallowed the dry lump of fear in his throat and resisted the urges of his churning stomach. The beast made up its mind and crouched for the spring. Boney pulled himself together and thrust out his skinny arms to ward off the impact of three hundred pounds of carnivore.

He stood there like a statue as minutes passed, and a stupid expression spread slowly over his face. He lowered his arms gradually to his sides, his dazed brain drinking in the significance of the stout arrow that had pierced the heart of the beast and killed it instantly. He shook his head to clear it and looked blankly in the direction from whence he thought he had heard the *twang* of a bow, centuries ago.

She stepped out of a bush, her ivory skin in startling contrast with the vivid crimson of the flowers that framed her, and Boney was not too tired or startled to blush. She moved gracefully toward him, wearing nothing but a smile and the five-foot bow slung over one milk-white shoulder. Boney found himself wondering irrele-

vantly how she kept herself from getting sunburned. Then she was standing before him, hands outstretched in friendship.

"Welcome to Flora," she said, with the barest of musical accent. "I am happy to have been of service."

"But you can't *be*," he stammered. "I mean, there aren't supposed to be any humanoids on this planet."

She laughed, and the sound was like silver bells. "I am here," she said. "Touch me. I am quite real."

He did not accept the invitation. "Oh, I believe you," he said hastily. A thought occurred to him. "But you speak English!"

"Of course," she said, regarding him with amused violet eyes. "There have been other visitors here before you, and I am very quick to learn."

But then her amused smile gave way to a frown of concern, and she reached out and caressed one of his blistered shoulders with cool, velvety fingertips. An alternating current of high voltage thrilled through his body.

She looked at the skinned palm and fingers of one hand. "But you are hurt," she murmured in honeyed tones. "You must come with me to where I live. I have herbs and salves that will heal and soothe." She clasped his hand gently in one of hers and led him through masses of flowers until they came to a small hut with a roof of interwoven branches. It was cool and dim inside. She motioned him to a mound of earth covered with broad leaves, and he sat down, his brain whirling.

He followed her gleaming white body as she glided about through the hut, gathering leaves and fruits and pressing their juices in a sort of gourd. Then she sat beside him and poured the liquid into one soft palm a little at a time and smoothed it with velvety strokes over his blistered torso and ragged hands.

The burning heat vanished magically from his skin, while waves of warmth welled up inside him. Automatically, he reached out his arms and put them around her, and she responded without surprise or hesitation. In the hours that followed in the cool, shady

grotto, he learned a number of interesting things that he had not picked up in his scout training.

Late that afternoon he bid her a reluctant goodbye, explaining that he had to report back to his ship. She extracted a promise from him to return, and then pressed a glittering rounded pebble into his hand, something like a diamond in the rough.

"Something to remind you of me," she murmured. He put the crude gem stone in his pocket and stumbled off. He looked back twice, but the hut had been swallowed up in the foliage.

THE Captain gave him a thorough dressing-down for his carelessness, then listened to an account of his fortunes and misfortunes in the twenty-four hours he had been alone in the forests of Flora. He listened skeptically to the last item in the narrative. He demanded to see the gem stone. Boney rummaged in his pocket but could not find it.

"It doesn't matter," the Skipper grunted. "Even if you did have it, you could have

picked it up yourself. In short, my boy, you dreamed everything."

Boney's jaw dropped. The Captain smiled.

"Look yourself over. Can you find any marks or bruises?"

Indeed, Boney could not. "But—," he started to say, and the Captain interrupted him.

"Uh-uh. Herb juices might soothe, but no wounds and bruises could heal that fast without leaving any trace." Then he put his hand kindly on Boney's shoulder. "I want to apologize for using you as a guinea pig." The young man looked uncomprehending.

"Doctor," said the Captain awkwardly, turning to the ship's medic, "maybe you better take over here."

The physician polished his spectacles reflectively. "Have you ever," he began tentatively, "heard of LSD or mescaline? No? Well, LSD—lysergic acid diethylamide—was a drug discovered in the twentieth century, about a hundred years ago. In very minute doses, it

produced hallucinations similar to those experienced by the mentally ill. Mescaline is a similar drug, found in a cactus, and was used by certain primitive American tribes to produce visions in their religious rites.

"Now, the earlier expeditions to land on Flora thought they were being attacked by all kinds of creatures, yet *there was nothing new or strange about them*. They all had strong resemblances to terrestrial animals, or were even identical in many cases. Stranger still, something always seemed to happen at the last moment—usually the creature turned aside and vanished into the forest, or just melted away, and no one was ever hurt, just as in a nightmare of falling, you never seem to hit the ground.

"They came to a quick conclusion. The heavy perfume given off constantly by the flowers has a weird effect on the human brain—waking nightmares, so to speak. The air of Flora is constantly filled with a volatile substance that produces hallucinations like those of LSD and mescaline."

The medic looked embarrassed. "An antidote was invented to neutralize this drug, and you were the first subject to use it. Naturally, to control the experiment properly, you could not be informed of the real purpose of the xanthine tablets. They are not a repellent at all. If you had taken one every hour with regularity, as instructed, I am sure you would just have had a nice afternoon stroll on Flora."

Boney looked at his hands in a daze. They were unscarred. Gone were the tatters of loose skin, the raw fingertips, the blackened blood under the nails. "Then—then none of it happened at all?" he stammered.

The medic shook his head. "No. And even though you spoiled the experiment by not following directions, in a way it proved our point. Every time you were menaced, but managed to take one of the tablets, the danger promptly disappeared. Yes, I think that with the aid of the antidote, Flora will be rendered safe for preliminary colonization until the settlers have had time to clear away the dream-flowers, at

least in a surrounding area of several square miles. You understand now?"

Boney nodded slowly, but part of his mind was far away from the ship, gazing with nostalgic eyes at the cool, dim, little hut and a lissome, ivory figure standing in the doorway.

"I think I'd like to go to my room," he said, and his eyes were moist.

The Captain nodded and patted him on the back sympathetically. "Never mind, Boney. You did a good job all the same."

The medic and the Captain watched his lank form disappear down the gangway and turn a corner. The Skipper turned to the physician.

"There's just one peculiar thing," he said thoughtfully. "That perfume-drug has never been known to cause anything but unpleasant hallucinations, without exception. How do you

account for his idyllic interlude with the—ah—forest nymph."

"I really can't say," replied the medic, and his stern face relaxed into an expression of sheer envy.

BACK in his little cubicle, dazed and exhausted, Boney removed his trousers, preparatory to lying down on his bunk. There was a tiny flash, and then a rattle as something fell out of the cuff and rolled under the cot. He knelt down and groped until his hand closed over the object and he brought it out into the light.

He started with surprise, then smiled gently, and his eyes grew misty with remembering as he turned the glittering gem stone in his fingers, over and over.

He decided he was going to be among the first permanent settlers on Flora.

THE END

WHICH WAS THE MONSTER?

by DAN MALCOLM

You really shouldn't judge a creature to be a monster just by its appearance. A monster should be judged by its deeds. One who does monstrous things is a monster

THE High Command had told—no, *ordered*—Ben Chase to get the message through, and Chase was going to get it through, no matter what costs it involved. They gave him the message at the Terran outpost on Zenuon, and told him to deliver it to the Terran Defense Ministry at London, Earth.

It was a very simple message. Chase had no idea of its contents, but it took the High Command only six hours to imprint the text on the molecules of his brain. A mild electric jolt, applied in just the right way, would shake the message out. No other method, neither torture nor narcohypnosis nor

deep probe, would expose the message. There was no way Chase could possibly lose or forget the message, nor could it be intercepted except by permanently intercepting Chase himself.

It was a foolproof system. Communications lines could be scrambled or tapped; codes could be broken. But imprint a message on the very mind of a human being and send him forth, and the message will get through—unless he is caught.

Relaxing in his one-man spaceship as it sliced through the darkness, Ben Chase wondered what his chances were of getting caught.

Capture, of course, would



mean death, if not sooner than later; the Enemy would be able to read the upper layers of his mind, and they would learn that he was the courier of a secret message—and they would strip away the layers of his mind like the skin of an onion, in their desperate and necessarily unsuccessful attempt to peel that message forth.

The thought of death or torture did not frighten Chase, though he did not welcome the idea. He was a civilian attache to the Terran War Staff on Zenuon, a man whose status was not quite that of a full-fledged military man. His main duties were spy activities, though when called upon he served as a courier.

This was the sixth time he had ferried a message across the five hundred light-years between Zenuon and Earth. Five times he had slipped through the Enemy lines without trouble. He had every reason to believe his luck would hold out.

He was a small, lean man without an ounce of spare fat; just now his face was covered with thick black stubble that

accentuated the sharpness of his keen features. He would not shave for the ten days it took him to reach Earth. Shaving might destroy the image he hoped to display in case of capture: that of the interstellar rum-runner, piloting a cargo of forbidden *Znath* to Terra. If he looked shabby and disreputable enough, perhaps they might believe him and release him without serious interrogation.

Perhaps.

THE ship was a meteorite-pitted old clunker with a false hold that any competent searcher was bound to discover. The *Znath* was hidden, none too thoroughly, down there. The War Staff had provided him with five cases of the stuff, by way of a cover for his trip.

Chase had set a Great Circle course, arching up above the plane of the galactic ecliptic to take him past the thickest concentrations of Enemy interceptors.

The course he had plotted out for himself took him past the thinly inhabited Gysl worlds, then through the totally empty and barren Thuuk sys-

tem, and finally past the rather more populous commercial worlds of Stialak.

After that, it would be clear sailing to Earth, unless there had been some shift in the battle lines since his last trip. The war ranged over thousands of light-years of space; there was no telling what worlds might be drawn in next.

It was Earth against the Vengilan Confederation, at least at the beginning—a massive struggle for control of the galactic trade routes, begun reluctantly by both sides but pursued with grim vigor ever since. The war was thirty years old now, and no finish was in sight.

A network of alliances and ententes had drawn in practically every civilized planet in the galaxy by now. Zenuon was pro-Earth; Stialak leaned toward the Enemy side. The galaxy was divided. Destruction and chaos reigned.

Chase no longer worried about the rightness or the wrongness of the conflict. He was a Terran; he was a spy. Those were the only things that mattered to him. He served

Terra to the best of his wily abilities, and eventually he would pay the spy's price. But not yet, he thought. Let this message get through, first.

The first leg of the voyage was without event. Chase's little ship shot upward through the zone of safety that surrounded Zenuon for a dozen light-years in all directions, and, leaving it, streaked for the Gysl system.

The six Gysl planets were theoretically neutral; in practice, they inclined toward the Enemy way of thinking, but the planets were so lightly populated that Chase did not worry about trouble there. He skimmed the Gysl system at a speed of three lights and kept going. Two days had elapsed; eight more and he would be home free.

Within his ship he relaxed, checking the automatic controls every time the sound of the gong told him he had reached the checkpoint, and spending the rest of his time eating, reading, and sleeping.

On the fourth day—he was in the region of the twelve uninhabited planets of the Thuuk

system now—his subetheric radio began to set up the steady, piercing whistle that told him someone within a fifty light-year radius was trying to call him.

Chase hesitated a moment. He could ignore the call and continue accelerating—but that might be inviting a blast of energy from an alien neutron-gun. It was wiser to reply, find out who was calling, what they wanted, before doing anything else. When a sentry cries, "Halt!", it's never smart to break into a run.

Elbowing up from his pneumorest, Chase made his way through the narrow companionway of the tiny ship and into the control room. He twirled dials on the subetheric communicator, while the insistent whistling sound continued, growing more intense.

Suddenly the earsplitting scream modulated pitch and turned into a mellow, booming sound—the warm baritone sound of a fine cello. It was the signal that he had matched frequencies with his caller.

"All right, come in, come in,

out there. I read you," Chase said. "I read you."

The vision-screen remained dead. On audio the message came across: "State identification and purpose of travel in this sector."

The challenge had come in English, but the voice, dry and whispery, was not the voice of a human being. That much Chase could be sure of, even allowing for the inherent distortions of subetheric radio.

He said, "This is a commercial craft, Terran license. I'm a noncombatant."

"Point of departure?"

"Zenuon."

"Destination?"

"Earth."

There was a moment of silence. "What is your cargo?" his unseen interrogator demanded.

"Woven goods." There were six crates of Zenuon blankets and other such luxury-goods for Terra's millionaires in the hold. "By what authority do you interrogate me?"

"By the authority of the Free Federation of Gysl," came the immediate reply.

"This isn't Gysl territory."

"In order to preserve our neutrality we must patrol increasingly extensive reaches of space, Earthman. I apologize for any inconvenience this necessity may cause you."

Chase scowled. He hadn't expected any trouble with the Gysl people this far out. As neutrals, the Gysl people had every right to patrol their territory—but this was a healthy distance from any part of space that could logically be called Gysl territory. He began to suspect that this was some Enemy doing.

Chase said, "I'm not in Gysl territory now and I'm heading away from your planets as fast as I can."

"This is no excuse. I must inspect your ship for contraband."

CHASE'S jaws tightened. He wondered how seriously to take the Gysl statement. Gysls were, as a rule, mild, unbelligent people. And they were neutrals. Chase knew that his message was urgent; stopping for this inspection might waste valuable time. He decided to chance it. Leaving the radio on,

he activated the course computer and started to set up for renewed acceleration.

While he worked, the Gysl said, "Earthman? Earthman, are you still there? Land on the nearest planet. We are approaching the Thuuk system. Compute your course for a landing on Thuuk V."

Chase ignored the instruction and set up his ship for a quick spurt of speed. With luck he might elude the Gysl ship.

But the Gysl was stubborn. "Earthman acknowledge receipt of message! Will you land on Thuuk V?"

Chase made no answer. He jabbed down on the actuating stud and his little ship began to

The Gysl's reaction was prompt. A bolt of force speared through space and slammed against Chase's energy shields. Chase watched his shield register. The needle was almost at *overload*. Another bolt like that would split his little vessel open like a log.

And his ship was unarmed. Well, he had called the Gysl's bluff and lost. Shrugging, he countermanded his full-speed-ahead computations and let the ship slow.

"You win," he told the Gysl. "I'll land on Thuuk V. But I intend to protest this act to Terran authorities. Gysl may be neutral, but that doesn't give you the right to shoot down any ship that happens to pass within a hundred light-years of your system—"

"This inspection is necessary in order to protect our rights as neutrals," said the Gysl crisply. "I hope no further use of force will be necessary. Please make the landing at once."

Chase muttered an affirmative and turned to his charts. They were quite close to the Thuuk system now—twelve barren, airless worlds, of no use to anyone. Thuuk V was the smallest of the dozen, a planetoid rather than a full-fledged planet, no more than eight or nine hundred miles in diameter. Chase located it with his instruments and worked out a landing orbit, while the Gysl supplied him with the coordinates it wished him to use.

Landing took less than an hour. Chase brought his small ship down neatly, standing it on its tail on the night side of Thuuk V. The Gysl ship, con-

siderably larger than his own, made its landing about a mile away.

The encounter puzzled him. It was not like the Gysl people to compel Terrans to make forced landings—at least, not this far from their own territory.

He waited. The radio flickered into life.

"We are coming to inspect your ship, Earthman."

"We?" Chase repeated. "It's a small ship, you know. I don't have room for dozens of you."

"Only two of us will come."

CHASE fidgeted, trying to tell himself that the inspection would be quick, that at worst the Gysl would discover the bottles of *Znath* and give him a mildly reproving slap on the wrist for smuggling prohibited liquor.

Two spacesuited figures were crossing the mile of naked rock that separated the Gysl ship from his own. Watching them through the televue, Chase frowned in confusion. One of the figures advancing toward him was easily recognizable as a Gysl by its size—the Gysl ra-

cial tendency was toward great height.

But the other figure could hardly be a Gysl, Chase thought. It was a short, stocky figure; no Gysl Chase had ever seen could possibly fit into so stumpy a spacesuit. The chunky figure had the characteristics of another race. Yes, Chase thought. Now the Gysl's beligerence made a bit more sense.

The other figure was a Vengilan. An Enemy.

It was a neat maneuver, Chase thought. Putting a Vengilan observer aboard a Gysl ship, but letting the Gysl do the actual talking, with the Vengilan manipulating the strings in the background. That way the Enemy could take advantage of Gysl "neutrality" to inspect any Terran ship, commercial or otherwise, that passed through the region.

Chase considered possible courses of action. His ship was unarmed, but he himself had a small blaster. He toyed with the idea of firing on the approaching figures, gunning them down and making an immediate getaway.

But he discarded the idea al-

most immediately. Undoubtedly there were others aboard the Gysl ship who would take instant retribution. The Gysl vessel was bigger, faster, and bore armament. He would never get away. Better to put up with the investigation, he thought, and see what happens afterwards.

The Gysl and his stocky companion had reached the ship now. Chase heard them rap soundly on the airlock door, and he nudged the opening mechanism. The lock slid back. The compression chamber filled with air. Moments later the two visitors entered, helmets in hand. Chase had been right. The Gysl's companion was one of the Enemy.

"I hadn't expected a visit from a Vengilan," Chase said sharply.

"I was accompanying the ship on a routine observation flight," the Vengilan shot back. "In view of the state of hostilities I was invited to assist in this investigation."

"Not by me."

"The Gysl captain permitted me entry. Your wishes are irrelevant, Earthman. Let us proceed."

Chase studied his visitors. The Vengilan was an authoritative-looking one, probably a high Enemy officer. He had the characteristic stockiness of the Vengilan, a high-gravity race. His pudgy little face was lardy with gobbets of fat, out of which beady rat-like black eyes peered. Vengilans were far from pretty, with their thick bodies and coarse gray skin. They looked like ugly squashed-together caricatures of human beings.

The Gysl people, on the other hand, looked nothing at all like human beings except in their basically humanoid structure. They looked more like monsters, despite their gentle ways.

The Gysl who stood in Chase's cabin was nearly seven and a half feet in height, but his fragility of body seemed to diminish his actual stature. A row of eyes ran along the Gysl's face, disappearing in back; there were ten staring orbs, altogether. The Gysl's mouth was a sharp beak; within lay twenty fleshy tongues whose sand-papery surfaces served in place of teeth. Watching a Gysl eat

was like seeing a pack of worms ripping meat apart.

Glaring at the Vengilan, Chase said, "I must protest this entry. I hadn't bargained for a Vengilan prowling around in my ship."

"Have you anything to hide, Earthman?" The Enemy asked mockingly.

"Of course not."

"Very well. Then your objections to my presence are merely legalistic and formal—Earthman foolishness, in short. I am here. I shall aid in the inspection. Stand back, Earthman, and open your cargo hold."

CHASE yanked back the switch, and the door of the cargo hold opened.

The Vengilan pointed at Chase and said to the Gysl, "Guard him until I return."

He stepped through the open doorway into the cargo hold.

Chase turned to the towering Gysl. "Since when do you take orders from a Vengilan?"

"I take orders because I must, Earthman."

"You *must*? That's a funny way for a neutral to talk, isn't

it? Or are you people in league with the Vengilans now?"

"I do as I'm told," the Gysl said. It seemed to Chase that the row of hideous eyes reflected sadness. But it was difficult to tell. It was almost impossible for someone not a Gysl to read the expression on such a strange, alien face. Chase wondered what the real story was, here. And where the Gysl's loyalties really lay.

He said, "This is really an intolerable thing, you know. Stopping a Terran ship on the pretext that you're neutral, and then letting a Vengilan come aboard."

The Gysl's eyes closed, in sequence, one-two-three-four-five. "I could not help myself, Earthman," he said in a quiet voice.

Suddenly the Vengilan belted harshly from within, "Earthman! Come here!"

Chase smiled. "I guess he found something he didn't like."

He entered the cargo hold, with the Gysl behind him. The Vengilan had inspected with characteristic Vengilan efficiency in only a few minutes. The bundles of gay woven

cloth that comprised Chase's official cargo lay scattered all over the floor. The Vengilan had found the entrance to the hidden compartment of the cargo hold; the bulkhead was open, and he was pointing angrily at a crate of *Znath*.

"I thought your cargo was woven goods," the Vengilan snapped.

"It is."

"And these five cases?"

"Looks like some kind of liquor, doesn't it?" Chase said innocently.

"*Looks* like? You're smuggling *Znath*, Earthman! In violation of interstellar law! This liquor is subject to severe control. It—"

Chase cut the Vengilan off with a loud chuckle. "You talk about interstellar law, do you? Here you are boarding a Terran ship under the cheapest of tricks, and you complain because I've got some forbidden booze! You sicken me!"

The Vengilan glared. "This matter must be reported. You shall be taken to Gysl for interrogation and internment, smuggler!"

"Listen," Chase said softly.

"I'm not any enemy of yours. I'm just a guy trying to make a little money in this damned universe. I've got a wife and three kids waiting for me on Earth. Take half the *Znath* for yourself and let me get on my way, huh?"

"Attempted bribery too?"

"Call it whatever you like. Just let me get going," Chase whined.

THE Vengilan continued to prowling around the cabin as if in search of more *Znath*. Chase felt a growing sense of uneasiness. Obviously the Vengilans had achieved some measure of domination in the Gysl system, though the Gysl people still were allowed to refer to themselves as "neutrals."

But if he were ever taken back to Gysl for interrogation, he would never get free. Under the thin excuse that he had been smuggling, the Vengilans on Gysl would keep him indefinitely, hoping to drag out of him any Terran secrets he might be bearing.

In short, he had fallen into a Vengilan trap. He moistened his thin lips, looking for some

way out of the snare. Earth was still more than a week's journey distant. And his message, whatever it was, had to arrive on time.

Chase stared up at the repulsive face of the silent Gysl. "Are you going to let him do this to me?"

"I have no authority over him," the Gysl said.

"You're the commander of a Gysl spacecraft. He's just an alien observer," Chase said.

"If he wants to bring you back to Gysl for interrogation, I cannot prevent him."

"Enough chatter," the Vengilan said brusquely. "Earthman, get into your spacesuit. You'll come aboard our ship and your vessel will be grappled to ours for the trip back to Gysl."

Chase poised himself lightly on the balls of his feet. Both the Vengilan and the Gysl were armed, he saw. He debated his next move.

Under no circumstance could he let himself be taken into custody. If he could somehow overpower both of his visitors, he might be able to blast off and lose himself in space be-

fore the Gysl in the other ship were aware of what had happened. But Chase saw no way he could attack both the Vengilan and the Gysl at the same time.

"Well?" the Vengilan rasped. "You're wasting time! Into your spacesuit, Earthman!"

Chase hesitated indecisively. Better to risk everything now, he thought, than to go back to certain torture on Gysl. He started toward the spacesuit rack. But before he reached it he whirled, lunged at the Vengilan, and caught the alien around the waist before he could go for his weapon. Chase clubbed down with his fist against the sensitive spot at the back of the Vengilan's neck.

At that moment the Gysl drew his blaster. Chase had no time to move. He watched the weapon rise, saw the blue flare of deadly light—

And lived.

The Gysl had blown the Vengilan's head off.

Chase gasped in astonishment. "You—you killed him instead of me!"

"Yes," the Gysl said softly, letting his nightmare face droop

in apparent sadness. "I killed him. And if I could kill all his kind—"

"What's happened on Gysl?"

"The Vengilans are 'protecting' us," said the Gysl bitterly. "They now send out their 'observers' on every ship. They are pushing us toward war with Earth—a war we do not want. Once I was master in my own ship. Not any more. Not since this—this dead thing came aboard, I needed this excuse to strike him down."

Chase was still stunned by the Gysl's action.

"Are there other Vengilans aboard your ship?"

"No. He was the only one. When we saw your ship, he ordered me to challenge you. I obeyed him—unwillingly. Now you may return to your world, Earthman, and to your wife and family."

The wife and family had been simply a spur-of-the-moment tear-jerking invention. But Chase was not so sure that return would be so simple.

"Wait a minute," he said. "Unless your Vengilan was soft in the head, he filed a report with your home world to the

effect that he had caught a Terran. Didn't he?"

The Gysl reflected a moment. "Yes, of course. It is the standard procedure. As soon as we saw you in our viewplate, we sent word back that we were pursuing a Terran ship."

Chase nodded abstractedly. Then, seeming to forget the matter entirely, he looked down at the Vengilan. His head was a shattered ruin.

"That gun of yours is quite an instrument," the Earthman said admiringly. "Mind if I get a look at it? I'm interested in guns—hobby of mine."

He took the weapon from the Gysl, examined it for an instant, and flipped it forward, snout first. Smiling coldly, Chase said, "I'm sorry to have to do this to you, friend. You saved my life just then, and I appreciate it. But I can't let sentiment interfere with my job."

"Why are you pointing the gun at me?" the Gysl asked in bewilderment.

"Get on the communicator," Chase ordered. "Tell your entire crew to suit up and come over here immediately. How many are there?"

"Six others."

"Okay. I want all six out of the ship and over here right away. Order them to make it fast. And I happen to understand the Gysl language, so don't try to give any phony messages."

That much was a bare-faced lie; Chase knew about eight words in Gysl, four of them profane and the rest obscene. But this was a risk he had to take. Keeping the Gysl commander at gunpoint, he opened the communicator channel.

"Speak," he ordered.

The Gysl nodded tensely, put his mouth near the microphone, and rattled off half a dozen sentences. Chase watched, fascinated by the writhing of the twenty tongues inside the Gysl's mouth.

Finally the Gysl looked up. "They are coming. But why do you do this?"

"I need your ship," Chase said. "The report has already gone out that there's a Terran ship trying to slip through this region. If I blast off in my own ship again, I'll only be caught by another scout—and next

time I may not be so lucky. In your ship no one will bother me. Understand? I *have* to get to Earth."

"But—I killed the Vengilan so you could escape—and now you steal my ship?"

"Worse than that," Chase said. "I'm going to have to kill you, too."

The Gysl started to speak; Chase cut him off with one quick slash of the energy-beam through his middle. The weird alien face registered a comprehensible emotion for the first time: the alien's expression was incontrovertibly that of dismay, shock, betrayal.

"Sorry," Chase said as the Gysl slumped to the floor next to the dead Vengilan. "You don't know how it hurts me to have to do this."

He suited up hastily, and, opening the airlock, waited outside the ship for the rest of the Gysl crew. He saw them coming, bounding gawkily across the barren plain, six tall ungainly creatures. Chase wondered what the range on the gun was. He decided to wait until they were no more than twenty-five yards away.

It was a heel's act, Chase thought broodingly. Here they came, so trustingly, and in a moment they would all be dead.

He fired.

The blaster beam raked across the six of them in one fiery burst, ripping open their spacesuits. Their atmosphere fled outward into the emptiness.

They died instantly.

Chase stood still for an instant, staring at the weapon in his hand, feeling a sadness deeper than he had ever known before in his life.

At least, he thought, he had been charitable. He had given them a quick death. It was better than simply leaving them here to starve.

MOVING rapidly now, for he had to make up for lost time, Chase dragged the six Gysl corpses into his own ship, setting them down one by one next to the other two bodies in the control cabin. The place looked like a slaughterhouse, he thought.

He left the little ship without bothering to shut the airlock. He realized he was abandoning all the *Znath*, but that was only

momentary cause for regret; the stuff was supposed to corrode the brain cells, and he was better off without it. Especially now, when he was more likely than ever to become a drinking man.

He crossed the mile that separated the two ships. With the gravity of Thuuk V as low as it was, the trip took him hardly any time; he travelled in huge leaps.

The Gysl had left the outer lock of their ship open. Blaster drawn, in case any of the Gysl had decided to remain behind, Chase entered the ship.

It was empty. Silent as a tomb. He closed the airlock and prowled around.

There were the sleeping-quarters of the Gysl—Spartan accommodations, nothing more than a sleeping-bunk. The Gysl captain had somewhat better accommodations, while the Vengilan rated a cabin all to himself.

Chase shrugged out of his spacesuit, racked it, and entered the control room. All spaceships worked on more or less the same principles; he didn't doubt that he would be

able to operate the Gysl ship after a few moments of studying the control panel.

He was right. The differences were trifling.

Chase sat at the controls for a long while without blasting off. He thought about the seven Gysl he had murdered. *Murdered*. Ugly word. But true.

Perhaps they had been family men. Even Gysl, ugly monsters that they were, had families. He wondered if he had just created seven brand new widows.

No help for it, he told himself. The message had to get through. Earth's safety was more important than the happiness of seven Gysl wives.

There had been no alternative for him. An alarm would be out for a small Terran ship; his only hope of reaching Earth without interception lay in switching ships. But at the same time he could not allow the seven Gysl to leave this planet in his own ship, for they would be intercepted, and the story of the switch was bound to come out that way.

There wasn't any choice, he told himself. He had to leave

Thuuk V in the Gysl ship, and the Gysl had to remain marooned here. Better dead than slowly starving, he had decided. And they were dead.

Chase studied the control console of the Gysl ship's armaments for a while. There was a long-range screen; he turned it on, fixed his own little ship in the crosshairs, and depressed the firing stud. A tongue of flame crept out across the airless surface of the planet, enveloping the small ship.

It blazed brightly; when Chase turned off the energy gun, only a blackened pile of charred ashes remained. It had been a hero's pyre, he thought. Now no one would ever find the elusive Terran ship and the missing seven Gysl.

"So long," he said out loud, thinking of the Gysl who had saved him—the noble monster who had struck a small blow for freedom's sake, and then

had uncomprehendingly given his life in the same cause. Chase set up his blastoff computations and his ship sprang skyward.

He finished the journey unmolested, in the Gysl ship. Landing at London, he was taken to the Defense Ministry, where he was relieved of his message.

The message had been a vital one. Chase was given a hero's welcome—he had brought the word, and he had done well.

"Your name will ring in history's halls forever," they told him as they pinned the medals on him.

Chase tried to smile and look heroic. But he couldn't quite succeed. He knew he would never forget the seven alien monsters who had given their lives, without knowing why, so the message could get through.

THE END

SPECIMENS

by GEORGE H. SMITH

The trip to Venus was made in a completely automatic spaceship. There were human beings on board but they had nothing to do. — The aliens had noticed this fact

GENERAL Oxford so far forgot himself as to grab the arm of the Secretary of Space as the first high whine of braking rockets broke through the quiet of the New Mexico afternoon.

"She's right on time, sir! The *Mayflower* is coming back from Venus right on time!"

"Yes, Oxford. I can hear as well as you can," The Secretary said somewhat testily for enthusiasm was not a trait he admired. He preferred solid, sensible, conservative officers in his department, officers whose way of looking at life matched his. He had no use for young fools like Lieutenant Bates who was on this first Venus ship.

"Look! There she is, sir... there she is!" Oxford pointed

upward to where a thin stream of rocket exhaust could be seen faintly against the cloudless sky. "She's coming in straight as a die."

"Small wonder," said the Secretary drily, "since the automatics are faultless."

"Ah yes... I had forgotten," Oxford sighed. "It's not like the old days when Jim Christian and I set the old *Aries* down on Mars."

"No, it isn't and we can thank the scientists for it."

"Yes, sir. Those four boys didn't have to do anything except read a good book and get ready to greet the Venusians, if any. That whole ship is the last word in complete robot operation."

"That's right, general. Even my not-too-bright son was able

to wangle a place on that crew," Secretary Bates said trying to hide the warmth that crept into his voice as he spoke of his son.

With an ear-shattering roar, the *Mayflower* dropped down on its fins with a braking jet of flame to ease the landing.

"Perfect! Perfect," the general breathed.

"Of course it was perfect," the Secretary snapped as he led the way toward the ship, but his hurried pace betrayed his anxiousness to see his son.

"One side...one side for Secretary Bates," the General said as they pushed through the crowd of reporters and ground personnel. "Look, sir! The hatch is opening."

The round airlock halfway up the side of the ship had swung open to the accompaniment of cheers from the crowd. A ladder glided automatically into place and everyone waited expectantly. But no one came down it.

"Do you suppose that something is wrong, sir?" Oxford asked the Secretary.

"There's only one way to find out," Bates said, his face

white. "Let's go on board."

The two of them, followed by several other officers, climbed up the ladder and into the interior of the ship. A brief inspection showed that it was empty. Not one of the four crew members was on board. In the main cabin they found a cage containing six small, two-legged creatures who were vaguely humanoid but obviously lacking in intelligence.

"What do you suppose it means, sir?" Oxford asked and as though triggered by the sound, the thoughts came into their minds.

"GREETINGS, PEOPLE OF EARTH. THIS IS A MIND TABLE PLACED IN YOUR SHIP BY THE PEOPLE OF VENUS. IT SEEMS TO BE SPEAKING YOUR LANGUAGE, BECAUSE MENTAL IMAGES ARE UNIVERSAL. WE SALUTE YOU AS THE FIRST TO CONQUER THE SPACE BETWEEN OUR TWO PLANETS. WE ARE VERY FAR ADVANCED IN MOST THINGS BUT HAVE BEEN DELAYED IN THIS BE-

CAUSE OF THE CLOUDS THAT SURROUND OUR PLANET. WITH THE KNOWLEDGE GAINED FROM YOUR SHIP WE HOPE TO SOON BE ABLE TO RETURN YOUR VISIT.

WE WERE AT FIRST PUZZLED BY THE FOUR CREATURES WE FOUND IN THE SHIP, FOR THEY WERE SUCH PRIMITIVE LIFE FORMS. WE COULD NOT BELIEVE THAT THEY WERE THE BUILDERS OF THE SHIP AND WE WERE PUZZLED UNTIL WE REALIZED THAT THEY WERE EXPERIMENTAL ANIMALS USED TO TEST THE EFFECTS OF SPACE FLIGHT ON LIFE.

WE WERE NOT SURE THIS WAS A CORRECT ASSUMPTION UNTIL WE DISCOVERED THAT THE SHIP WAS COMPLETELY AUTOMATIC. KNOWING THEN THAT WE WERE RIGHT, WE TOOK THE

LIBERTY OF TURNING THE CREATURES OVER TO OUR SCIENTISTS FOR VIVISECTION IN ORDER TO GAIN INFORMATION THAT WILL AID US IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF OUR SHIPS.

IN RETURN FOR THE ANIMALS WHICH WE USED, WE ARE PLACING A GROUP OF LABORATORY ANIMALS OF OUR OWN IN THE SHIP WHICH WE TRUST WILL BE OF SIMILAR USE TO YOU. WE THINK THAT WE HAVE MADE A FAIR EXCHANGE AND HOPE THAT YOU WILL AGREE. GOODBYE UNTIL WE MEET AGAIN. WE HOPE FOR GREAT THINGS BETWEEN OUR PLANETS."

The Secretary of Space covered his face with his hands. "Laboratory animals," he gasped. "Oh My God!"

THE END

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